



Writing Amrika: Literary Encounters with America in Arabic Literature

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Writing *Amrīkā*
Literary Encounters with America in Arabic Literature

A dissertation presented by

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to

The Department of Near Eastern Languages & Civilizations

In partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy

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Abstract

My dissertation, *Writing Amrīkā: Literary Encounters with America in Arabic Literature* is an examination of this cross-cultural literary encounter primarily through fictional prose written in Arabic from the beginning of the 20th century into the 21st century. The texts studied in this dissertation are set in America, providing a unique entry point into questions about how Arab authors choose to represent Arab characters experiencing their American surroundings. While each text is treated as a unique literary production emerging from a contingent historical moment, an attempt is made to highlight the continuities and ruptures that exist in both the content and form of these texts spanning a century of the Arab literary experience with America. I argue that this body of literature can be understood through its own literary history of the American encounter in Arabic literature; a literary history in dialogue with an East-West encounter that has more frequently represented the western ‘Other’ through European characters and locales. In focusing on the process of identification by Arab characters in America this dissertation argues that the American encounter initiates a particular ambivalence resulting in multiple, and often contradictory, identifications on behalf of the Arab characters which result in poignant crises and strained narrative resolutions.

*To Alison for her constant support
To my parents for their unwavering confidence
To Prof. Granara for his relentless encouragement*

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Introduction

The Statue of Liberty is the iconic symbol of American freedom and liberty, and its position in New York City's harbor has, for decades, served to welcome the arrival of immigrant populations to America's shores. The *tabula ansata* in the statue's left hand evokes the codification of liberty and freedom adumbrated in the American Constitution, and the broken chains surrounding the statue's feet evoke victory over tyranny. The statue's position next to Ellis Island casts its symbolic presence over the very site of immigrant arrival, emitting this powerful message to the diverse cast of immigrants arriving on America's shores. The Statue of Liberty perpetuates until the present day as a quintessential American symbol, abounding on stamps, official letterhead, and in miniature form in souvenir shops across the country. As with all symbols, the attempt to unify their meaning is constantly threatened by endeavors to change, subvert and impart new significances to canonical meanings, especially as unique subjectivities cast their gaze and reinterpret this statue. When Arab émigré populations began to settle in America in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, with successive waves of migration occurring until the present day, this iconic statue would enter the prose of Arabic fiction and travel writing, and the contestation over its meaning would become merely one fascinating point of interest in the American encounter in modern Arabic literature.

One of the first short stories ever composed in Arabic and set in America, by the Syrian émigré °Abd al-Masīḥ Ḥaddād (1890-1963), culminates in a poignant and symbolic scene in Battery Park, New York City, circa 1920. It is from this precise location in Manhattan, where the Statue of Liberty is perfectly placed on the horizon, that

a Syrian émigré couple is locked in an impassioned argument. The wife, Adma, is excoriating her husband for having left their children alone at home and wandering out to the park. The husband, Nakhleh, is in such a state of dejection over his fate, that he is on the cusp of insanity, as his irresponsible actions toward his own children prove. Nakhleh is devastated by what he considers his emasculation in America; after living in America for a few years his wife Adma has emerged as the familial breadwinner, necessitating his transition to caregiver of the children. Adma's success in peddling essentially eclipsed his ability to financially provide for the family, and Nakhleh's self-image is subsequently decimated, leading to these feelings of dejection. Adma, for her part, is eminently satisfied by her prosperous commercial ventures and her new status as the family's breadwinner. At this very moment in Battery Park, she is roused by her husband's recent insolence in walking out on the children, and fed up with his sulking over the opportunities she has achieved. In berating him, Adma exclaims, "here in America I am everything, the Statue of Liberty continues to raise its hand and it is a woman! I have the right to raise my hand at home, to command and prohibit whether it pleases you or not, so choose what you would like!"¹ The transference of symbolic power is a profound moment in this early example of Arabic fiction, as this power is seemingly beaming straight from the Statue of Liberty into this young Syrian woman.

More than sixty years later a young Egyptian author named Raḍwā ʿĀshūr pens her autobiographical experience as a graduate student in America in the 1970s, in a work entitled *al-Rihla; Ayyām Ṭālība Misriyya fī Amrīka* (*The Journey; The Days of an*

¹ The quote is from the story *Timthāl al-Ḥurriyya* (*The Statue of Liberty*) found in ʿAbd al-Masīḥ Ḥaddād's collection of stories entitled *Ḥikāyāt al-Maḥjar* (*Tales of Exile*). (New York: al-Maṭbaʿa al-Tijāriyya al-Sūriyya al-Amrīkiyya, 1921) p. 171. My translation.

Egyptian Student in America, 1983). At the end of this text, Raḍwā recounts a visit to New York City with her husband Murīd, where the two are standing on top of the Empire State Building on a foggy afternoon unable to discern any trace of the Statue of Liberty through the dense haze enveloping the city. Masterful scenes like this belie a rich literary quality to ʿĀshūr’s autobiographical work, which plays with the narratological boundaries between memoir and fiction. The important fact here is that Raḍwā and her husband did not even catch a glimpse of the Statue of Liberty, and each subsequent day of their visit to New York City begins with the couple contemplating a visit to the Statue, but instead they explore Harlem, the next day they visit the painting *Guernica* at New York’s Museum of Modern Art, and on their last day they enjoy a Puerto Rican street festival. They very deliberately choose *not* to visit the iconic Statue. At the end of their visit, as they revel in the Puerto Rican street festival, Raḍwā sarcastically asks her husband: “It isn’t right to come to New York and *not* visit the Statue of Liberty, or at least buy a miniature of it!” Her husband replies, “We’ll ask one of the families for a Puerto Rican flag [instead].”² The Statue of Liberty is a powerful, yet clearly diminished symbol in this text, becoming a symbol *against* which Raḍwā defines her experience in America.

In these two snapshots, the very same symbol, the Statue of Liberty, is interpreted through textual moments in modern Arabic literature with incredible contrast. They are interpretations that react, at different historical moments, to the iconographic meaning that this neoclassical monument exudes in its symbolization of freedom and liberty, not to mention its gendered presence. In ʿAbd al-Massīḥ Ḥaddād’s story from the 1920’s,

² These quotations are extracted from Raḍwā ʿĀshūr’s *al-Riḥla; Ayyām Ṭālība Miṣriyya fi Amrīkā*. (Beirut: Dār al-Ādāb, 1983), p. 149. My translations.

aply titled *Timthāl al-Ḥurriyya – The Statue of Liberty* – the statue’s unique blend of power and especially gender significations are filtered through this husband and wife, resulting in diametrically opposed viewpoints within this very story. The wife Adma identifies with the Statue, its femininity and power, as a concrete testament to her new life in America and the possibilities that it offers. While Ḥaddād’s story begins by narrating the husband Nakhleh’s choice to emigrate to America and bring his young wife, more than ten years his junior, it is Adma’s powerful female voice, the voice that now ‘commands and prohibits,’ that leaves an indelible mark at the end of the story. Commensurate to the empowerment that his wife Adma experiences is the emasculation that Nakhleh suffers. For Nakhleh, the Statue of Liberty is also a powerful symbol, yet this is a power positioned against his own masculinity, as his wife becomes an incarnation of the Statue’s power that effectively usurps those fiscal and familial responsibilities he coveted. Nakhleh is left confused and distraught by the changes he experiences in America, and the Statue of Liberty is the symbolic prism through which he is able to interpret these distressing shifts. As both Arab subjectivities emphasize in this story, the gendered implications of the Statue are its primary signification, inaugurating a torrent of empowerment or emasculation that is dramatized in this fictional, yet very real, historical experience of Arab émigrés attempting to make sense of their transition to America.

Decades later, Raḍwā ʿĀshūr in *al-Rihla*, takes quite the opposite perspective on the Statue, which goes intentionally unseen, even mocked, and is thereby rendered powerless. The gender signification that was so crucial to Ḥaddād’s piece goes completely missing here. The massive shift between the perspectives presented in these

two Arabic texts set in America reflects a similarly massive shift in perspective by Arab émigrés and visitors to American shores in the second half of the 20th century, resultant of America's emergence as a global arbiter and power broker post-World War II.

Therefore, the Statue gains a particular signification through its absence in this text, as judged against the protagonist's leftist and anti-imperialist political leanings. While this episode on top of the Empire State Building is, on the one hand, a simple description of an Arab tourist's experience in New York City, it is also a politically charged and intentional annihilation of the power of this iconic symbol of American supremacy. By the time we, as readers, reach this episode, placed near the end of the text, we have been made fully aware of Raḍwā's resistance to America's foreign interventions in the wider world, and we must read this snubbing of the Statue of Liberty through this lens. Raḍwā has absolutely no desire to behold an iconic symbol of American freedom and liberty when she is focused on recounting the injustices of America's recent interventions in Vietnam and Chile, or engrossed in the history of inequality suffered by the African-American community throughout American history. Evoking the Statue through its absence beyond the haze, and mocking it later, in opting to purchase a Puerto Rican flag instead of its miniature, represent highly charged moments positioning a leftist Arab subjectivity *against* this beacon of American power.

This oppositional act is given further depth through Raḍwā's engagement with New York City through her visit to Harlem, Picasso's painting *Guernica*, and the Puerto Rican street festival. The depth of experience conveyed by these trips, presented in the text as *more* valuable activities than visiting the Statue, hinges on Raḍwā's exploration of America through its disempowered minorities, and reflections on resistance artwork. As

both narrator and protagonist, Raḍwā offers a new geographic and intellectual iconography of America, substituting the Statue of Liberty and its popular significations, with marginalized American populations and memories of imperialism, effectively reconfiguring the American landscape for her Arab reader.

These two textual snapshots emphasize a crucial aspect of the study of literature of encounter. This literature, more often than not, reveals more about the Arab subjectivity engaged in the encounter, than it does about the American host. The descriptive paragraph concerning the Statue of Liberty opening this very introduction is *not* the same Statue we find in Ḥaddād and °Āshūr's narratives. In Ḥaddād, the Statue is anthropomorphized through the story's female protagonist, Adma, distilling a bevy of gender, socio-economic, and assimilative significations for the early Arab community in America. In °Āshūr's text, the Statue's significance is most pronounced through its very devaluation and absence, as the work constructs Raḍwā's subjectivity through strong oppositional political affiliations. The Statue of Liberty becomes reinvented in these texts to convey important transitions and struggles of the Arab encounter with America at different historical moments, and it, like many symbols, geographies, and experiences, reveals crucial nuances of Arab subjectivities in the midst of a critical engagement with the American other.

These two examples also reveal the temporal breadth of this literary encounter in Arabic. The literature follows on the heels of historical emigration patterns from the Arabic-speaking world, which began in earnest in the late 19th century, and continues until the present day. As it is wont to do, literature reflects, questions, and expresses the trials and tribulations of its contingent moment, and the literature of the American

encounter is no exception. Hence, this literature becomes a parallel record to the history of Arab, and the Arab American, experience in America over the course of the 20th century and beyond. This accounts for how very different the symbolic inscription of the Statue of Liberty can be in Ḥaddād's short story from 1921 versus Raḍwā 'Āshūr's experience as a graduate student in the late 1970s. America had changed so dramatically in these intervening decades, and Arabs nations, some being born and gaining independence within this timeframe, likewise changed. Therefore, each literary encounter with America was accompanied by new historical, political, and ideological contexts through which new anxieties, ambivalences, and meanings were born. Novels inscribing this encounter and positing renewed nuance and themes have continued to be written until the present day, offering new colors to this literary kaleidoscope of experience.

Another important facet of this story of encounter between Arabs and America is conveniently paralleled in the example of the Statue of Liberty and its foreign provenance. Just as the Statue was a gift from France, crossing the Atlantic to American shores, the East-West encounter as trope in Arabic literature has travelled between European and American shores. The American encounter, in terms of literary output and critical response, has a secondary status in comparison to the sheer quantity of texts and concomitant critical response to the Arab-European literary encounter. Historical circumstance is certainly the progenitor of the comparatively larger body of work on the European encounter in Arabic, since the colonization of Middle Eastern and North African countries in the 19th and 20th centuries brought nations and peoples into close and often contentious colonial and post-colonial relationships with one another. The result of

these often strained and sometimes violent relations was a rich body of literature from Syria to Sudan, and from Yemen to Morocco, that probed these social, economic, and cultural relationships in the Arabic idiom.

What is always at stake in this Arabic literature of encounter, regardless of European or American provenance, is the question of identity and the process of identification. As people of different cultural origins interact they expose each other to their fundamental identifications through their modes of thinking, religious beliefs, customs and traditions. The literature of encounter, whether set in Europe or America, looks to expose similarities and differences between people, frequently seeking to reconcile perceived differences. This process does not take place in a vacuum, but is usually accompanied by hierarchical notions of power and prestige between people, nations and cultures. Identities become caught in this confusing maelstrom ranging between accommodation and rejection, where coercion can often rear its head. The negotiation of Arab identity in the literature of encounter will be a crucial part of this evolving interaction, and theorists who have contemplated this dynamic concept will help navigate this complicated process.

A crucial disclaimer is needed at the outset regarding language. This dissertation is toeing a fine line between generalization and specificity that is related to the use of the word 'Arab' throughout the study. I use this term to primarily refer to a linguistic marker, the Arabic language, and secondarily to recognize the sense of identity that this shared cultural language imparts for its speakers. Even though the two authors mentioned above, °Abd al-Massīḥ Ḥaddād and Raḍwā °Āshūr, came from modern day Syria and Egypt, respectively, and their writings are separated by decades, they were both

writing for an Arabic-reading audience that spans a massive geography. The literary world, its journals, and newspapers maintained linkages between Arabic speakers from North Africa to Iraq who shared a loosely defined cohesion emanating from a common language and a common literary tradition, not to mention many other important shared affiliations. My forthcoming comments and analysis regarding negotiations of an ‘Arab’ identity risk generalizing the very specific and contingent literary examples that emerge from the pens of primarily Levantine and Egyptian Arabs whose works are studied in this dissertation.³ That said, my intention in using the term Arab, and modern Arabic literature, is to emphasize the cohesion, real or imagined, that this term does still impart to those who speak Arabic; not only through their shared language but through shared experiences that transcend national borders.

I argue that the texts analyzed in this dissertation, which include short stories, novels and a literary travelogue, and whose publication dates span nearly a century, constitute a unique body of literature deserving their own literary history.⁴ In addition, this literature of the Arab encounter with America turns on a deep ambivalence, which demands that questions of identity and the process of identification are closely examined. The American experience in Arabic literature offers a unique chapter to the well-known western encounter in Arabic with Europe and Europeans. While the European encounter

³ While the texts analyzed in this dissertation are written almost exclusively by authors of Syrian and Lebanese origin pre-World War I, and then Egyptians thereafter, this has to do with factors related to trends in literary production, access to travel, and other issues over the 20th century. Despite the relatively limited national scope of the authors studied here, I still feel confident reflecting on ‘Arabic literature’ in general since writing America, in the last few years especially, is a burgeoning trend also among Lebanese, Iraqi, Palestinian, and Moroccan authors.

⁴ The texts analyzed in this dissertation will include Amine Rihany’s *The Book of Khalid* (1911), ‘Abd al-Massīḥ Ḥaddad’s *Hikāyāt al-Mahjar* (1921), Mikhā’īl Nu’ayma’s *Sā‘at al-Kūkū* in the collection *Kān mā Kān* (1925), Yūsuf Idrīs’s *New York 80* (1980), Raḍwā ‘Āshūr’s *al-Riḥla; Ayyām Tālība Miṣriyya fī Amrikā*, Sunallah Ibrahim’s *Amrikānī* (2003), and ‘Alā’ al-Aswānī’s *Shikāghū* (2008).

is a reference point, given this encounter's sheer predominance in the 20th century Arab literary imaginary - and indeed these two western literary encounters share common concerns - America poses new challenges to Arab authors in attempting to represent these distant and unexpected terrains, diverse peoples, and their unfamiliar ideas, complicating what it means to write *Amrīkā*. As the example of the Statue of Liberty reminds us, writing *Amrīkā*, is not really a simple effort to describe this foreign place and people, but an exploration of the self, similarity and difference, in attempting to understand and represent America, its people, places, ideas and symbols.

Chapter 1: Historical Realities and Theoretical Directions of the American Encounter in Arabic Literature

This opening chapter is aimed at situating the research and analysis of the three subsequent chapters by detailing the vital literary and historical context into which this literature is ensconced, as well as specifying the theoretical concerns that drive my approach. The literary, historical and theoretical background and contextualization detailed in this chapter attempt to elucidate a paradox incongruity in the literary phenomenon I am tracking in modern Arabic literature; while the literature of the American encounter comprises a small and defined number of texts, the temporal frame of the project is expansive, extending nearly a century. In confronting this incongruity, the need for contextualization and theoretical focus is crucial, in order to help cohere works scattered over space and time. I intend to situate the Arabic literature of the American encounter in this chapter in three important ways: engaging the literary history of the East-West encounter to understand how the American encounter evinces similarities and differences from this larger body of work; examining the history of Arab emigration, immigration and travel to America between the first wave of emigration in the late 19th century to the present; and expounding the theoretical concerns paramount to the forthcoming literary analysis. This tripartite approach will initiate a much needed dialogue between an East-West encounter in Arabic that *itself* travels between Europe and America. The historical context of Arab emigration, immigration and travel to America will highlight the dialectic creative process between the historical and literary experience internal to my texts. The theoretical concerns will reflect this dissertation's

concern for identity, and the process of identification, which, like all literatures of encounter, is constantly being reinterpreted and renegotiated by Arab subjectivities in the encounter with America.

The East-West Dynamic in Modern Arabic Literature: An Overview

The 1798 invasion of Egypt by Napoleon Bonaparte and the French army was a watershed moment in the history of the Arab world, and for Egypt in particular. The implications of this event were far reaching, as the presence of this Western power, along with its assortment of scientific advancements, military technologies, and new forms of governance would inspire subsequent modernization projects in the following decades under Muhammad Ali's reign. Egypt's effort to modernize, given its centrality to the Arabic-speaking regions of the Ottoman Empire, would have reverberations throughout the wider region, spreading west into the Maghreb and north into the Levant. While this attempt to modernize the army and the government advanced, concomitant shifts in material, intellectual, and cultural production were also influenced by these developments. On the one hand this was accomplished through tangible advancements like the establishment of a printing press, with Egypt's first gazette *al-Waqā'i' al-Miṣriyya* first being published in 1828. In addition, in the literary domain, the cultural establishment busied itself with translating and adapting western forms of writing into Arabic, creating an influential body of literature expressing new concerns and themes, not to mention the fact that this literature was constructed utilizing foreign forms. As M. M. Badawi aptly states in his sweeping history of modern Arabic literature, "out of the fruitful meeting of the indigenous Arabic literary tradition and the cultural forces of the

West, modern Arabic literature was born.”⁵ While the literary texts in Arabic that featured the East-West encounter would not emerge until subsequent decades, such as Fransīs Marrāsh’s *Ghābat al-Ḥaqq* (*The Forest of Truth*, 1865), the new political and cultural horizons initiated by the modernization of the Egyptian state structure, with an eye towards Europe, represented a starting point for the synergy and tension that would define this cross-cultural encounter. The literary cadre in the Arabic-speaking world, from this point forward, was positioned squarely between its own rich literary history and the literary influences steadily streaming in from the West.

Fundamental to understanding the East-West encounter in Arabic literature is confronting the intense ambivalence resulting from the multiple and often contradictory valences of the West. At any given moment, and from differing perspectives, the West and its representatives could be understood as invaders and occupiers, or as symbols of progress, luxury and technological advancement. The very first chronicle of Napoleon’s invasion in 1798 by ʿAbd al-Raḥmān al-Jabartī expressed this overwhelming ambivalence.⁶ As Rasheed el-Enany has summarized of al-Jabartī’s chronicle, it represents “a record that conveyed both the horror and fascination [with the French], with the latter being arguably the dominant sentiment.”⁷ Al-Jabartī was merely the first to describe the psychological and emotional pendulum that typified the range of reaction to the West. Attraction and repulsion were two sides of the same coin. Contemplation of this acute predicament was initially found in eyewitness accounts like al-Jabartī’s

⁵ Badawi, M.M.. *A Short History of Modern Arabic Literature*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), p.1.

⁶ ʿAbd al-Raḥmān al-Jabartī penned *ʿAjāʾib al-Āthār fī al-Tarājim wal-Akḥbār* (trans. *Al-Jabartī’s History of Egypt*) after witnessing the French invasion of Egypt in 1798. It is the first, and most significant historical document on this invasion in Arabic, from an Egyptian perspective - even though the author was of Somali origins - he was born in Cairo and lived there most of his life.

⁷ El-Enany, Rasheed. *Arab Representations of the Occident; East-West Encounters in Arabic Fiction*. (London: Routledge, 2006), p. 33.

chronicle or Rifāʿ al-Ṭaḥṭāwī's detailed account of his experience in France, composed after leading the first Egyptian delegation sent to Paris in 1826, entitled *Takhlīs al-Ibrīz fī Waṣf Bārīs* (*The Extraction of Gold or an Overview of Paris*, 1834). The dialectic would also permeate Arabic literature from the late 19th century onward in its umbrella manifestation as the tradition vs. modernity debate, and even more pointedly through renderings of western settings and characters within this literature. For example, Muḥammad al-Muwayliḥī's *Ḥadīth ʿĪsā bin Hishām* (1907), serialized around the turn of the 20th century, dispatches its cast of characters to Paris to assess this Western metropolis, while *ʿAdhrāʾ Dinshāway* (1908), by Maḥmūd Tāhir Ḥaqqī fictionalizes a dramatic historic event; depicting the distrustful interaction between the British colonial administration and Egyptian peasants following a violent incident in the countryside and a subsequent trial. These two early examples abound with praise, condemnation, and distrust in depicting the interactions between Egyptians and their western counterparts. Following in the footsteps of these early literary examples, the 20th century is rife with of fiction that features this ever-shifting ambivalence towards the West.

Alongside the ambivalence inherent to the cross-cultural encounter, real and literary alike, the East-West encounter in modern Arabic literature also features probing investigations of the self and one's process of identification. Some of the theoretical questions surrounding this process will be explored later in this chapter. As for the lived experience, the simple fact is, the history of colonial rule by European nations in the region that would come to be known as the Middle East brought Arabs face-to-face with the West, and simply put, within this encounter "the Arab learns about himself, what he

has, and what he lacks.”⁸ While this straight-forward quotation from Issa Boullata frames the issue as one of measuring the self through materiality and the possession of things or ideas, others critics have conceived of the identification process as one of unfolding. As Muhammad Siddiq writes in his work on the Egyptian novel:

In modern history, the quest for identity, whether individual, communal, or national, in Egypt as in other Arab and Islamic states and societies, has unfolded against an increasingly more troubled (and troubling) awareness of the cultural “Other”. In the case of Egypt this has always been the West.⁹

Both conceptualizations of identity recognize the fact that this encounter with the West, lived or fictional, is a jarring, potentially traumatic experience, the fallout of which reveals the exploration of self against a western other. The simple fact is, for more than a century, Arabic texts that have focused on the encounter with the West have depicted Western characters, settings, and ideas in order to enact, consciously or subconsciously, crucial explorations of the self.

These two hallmark features of the East-West encounter in Arabic literature, ambivalence and critical self-exploration, are just as significant today as they were over a two hundred years ago. Many aspects of the east-west encounter are constantly changing. The very concept of the West itself, primarily a European West, now includes the Americas, both North and South. The political and economic dynamics between the West and the Middle East and North Africa, have since shifted between stages of colonialism, postcolonialism and neocolonialism. These vacillations have inspired new perspectives and reorientations of the Arab self towards the West. New anxieties and

⁸ Boullata, Issa. “Encounter Between East and West: A Theme in Contemporary Arabic Novels” in *Middle East Journal*, Vol 30, No. 1 (Winter, 1976), p. 50.

⁹ Siddiq, Muhammad. *Arab Culture and the Novel; Gender, Identity, and Agency in Egyptian Fiction*. (New York: Routledge, 2007), p. xvii.

layers of ambivalence towards the West have emerged from ideological positions, such as the attraction to socialism and communism in many Arab nations in the 50s and 60s. Geopolitical alliances, wars, and western support for civil society and democratic advancement are issues that engender intense reaction in the Middle East, also adding new ambivalence and redefinitions of the relationship between citizen and government. The East and the West, here conceived in vague terms over a significant span of time as the ‘Arab World’ defining the East and ‘Europe and America’ as the West, have been shifting their relationship to one another in seeming perpetuity. Each literary text therefore emerges as a marker that converges different aspects of this historic interaction at a particular moment in its literary history.

In that this research will transfer this literary discussion from a West originally conceived through Europe, to American shores, the ambivalent attitudes commonplace in the East-West encounter with Europe and the familiar explorations of self will transition almost seamlessly to this new western geography. This is because the United States, as a more recent incarnation of the West, presents a multitude of contradictions not unlike its European predecessors that engender similarly ambivalent reactions from Arab writers. This is especially the case in the second half of the 20th century, as Saudi literary critic °Abdallah al-Ghidhāmi has noted, “The United States has been unable to shift the relationship between power/weakness to a humane perspective what aligns with many of its domestic achievements. The United States continues to present two contradictory politics; one internally democratic, the other externally dictatorial, and between the two are many different guises.”¹⁰ This assessment of America, penned two hundred years

¹⁰ Ghidhāmī, °Abdallah. *Riḥla ilā Jumhuriyya Naẓariyya: Muqārana li-Qirāʾat Wajh Amrikā al-Thaqāfi*. (Aleppo: Markaz al-°Inmāʾ al-Ḥadārī, 1998) p. 25.

since al-Jabartī's chronicle of Napoleon's invasion of Egypt, revisits the pendulum of 'horror and fascination' that al-Jabartī expressed towards the French invasion in 1798, in that Arab subjectivities can confront an America capable of inspiring such antagonism towards its foreign policy, while also revealing a reverence for America's domestic democratic values and political agendas. The American encounter therefore contributes to the discourse of the East-West encounter by providing expressions of ambivalence towards America as the most recent incarnation of the West. In addition, Arab characters' explorations of self are cast against this uniquely American landscape that continually surprises its visitors.

In addition to discourses of ambivalence and identification that permeate the literature of encounter, formal aspects of this literature become infused with cross-cultural borrowings and influences. In fact, the ambivalence and self-exploration that are such dominant motifs of this literary encounter can also be understood as manifestations of debates inherent to the very form of what we call *modern* Arabic literature. Most of the texts of the East-West encounter take the novel and short story as their preferred form, this being the case for both the European and American encounters. Both of these forms of literature and their guiding structures are considered literary importations from the West, having gone through a variegated process of translation, adaptation, and adoption over many decades in the Arab world. Hence the preferred modern literary forms to engage with the West were those forms adapted from the West itself. This interesting conundrum has not gone unnoticed by critics, as Muhammad Siddiq states of the Arabic novel, "the uncanny coincidence of the emergence of the novel as a critical genre in the bosom of colonial rule injects yet another note of ambivalence at the heart of

the novelistic enterprise.”¹¹ Form and content have a true synergy in the literary history of the East-West encounter; intense debates over what to adopt from the West animate the literature itself, and besiege the discourse surrounding the literary forms. Therefore inquiry into both form and content is crucial, as Wail Hassan has surmised in *Immigrant Narratives* (2013), “the interplay between the writer’s aesthetic choices and political vision is thus one of the richest areas of inquiry.”¹² This statement will certainly inform this dissertation’s inquiry into the American encounter.

Given the fact that the literary history of the East-West encounter resulted from interactions with Europe, it is worth citing some of the common thematic concerns of this literature and its own literary history, since the American encounter will develop and engage many of the same themes. In the attempt at summarizing what can be a very complicated cultural encounter containing many unique works of fiction, I will point out shared aspects of the European encounter in Arabic fiction that some of the more canonical works have emphasized.

A motif employed by many texts is to dispatch an Arab male protagonist to Europe where he meets a female European counterpart. This relationship becomes the prism through which that Arab male learns about the West and its cultural and social mores. The relationship also frequently develops into a sexual relationship where the Arab protagonist experiences liberation from the traditionalism of his society. Variations on this repetitive motif are presented in Tawfīq al-Ḥakīm’s *‘Uṣfūr min al-Sharq* (*Bird of the East*, 1938), Yaḥyā Ḥaqqī’s *Qindīl Umm Hāshim* (*The Saint’s Lamp*, 1944), Suheil

¹¹ Siddiq, Muhammad. *Arab Culture and the Novel; Gender, Identity, and Agency in Egyptian Fiction*. (New York: Routledge, 2007), p .13.

¹² Hassan, Wail. *Immigrant Narratives; Orientalism and Cultural Translation in Arab-American and Arab-British Literature*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), p. 221.

Idris's *al-Hayy al-Lātīnī* (*The Latin Quarter, 1953*) and al-Ṭayyib Ṣāliḥ's *Mawsim al-Hijra ʿilā al-Shimāl* (*The Season of Migration to the North, 1966*). Casting the encounter through this particular gender dynamic inverts traditional patriarchal power dynamics, as the female characters become embodiments of the powerful West. Therefore, the sexual aspect of this encounter is not simply an issue of the Arab protagonist's liberation, but considering these power dynamics, the Eastern male enacts a form of domination over the West. Nowhere is this motif more pronounced, and exaggerated for sheer literary impact, than the sexual violence performed in *Season of Migration to the North*. Of course the conflation of sex and power, combined with reversing traditional gender roles, allows for a post-colonial catharsis of sorts, in demonstrating power over one's [former] oppressor. But this dynamic can also be harmful in the promotion of Orientalist stereotypes produced in the West in perpetuating a depiction of an Arab male protagonist as emerging from a repressed culture and performing violence in transgressing the rights and bodies of European women.¹³ Negotiating sexualized power dynamics between Eastern men and Western women leads to a conflation of politics, gender, repression, and dominance in fascinating ways as a motif in the literature of encounter.

Imbedded in many of these narratives, as the example of conflating power and sex makes clear, is a distinct self-criticism, as previously touched on in the discussion of identification. In confronting the West in its different literary guises there is a constant assessment of the self by comparison. One tendency that emerges is to criticize the disconnect between adopting western products and material goods while the intellectual accommodation of western beliefs is scoffed at. This motif emerges as early as al-

¹³ This point is made in a discussion of gender within the context of the East-West encounter by Ṭarābīshī, Jūrj. *Sharq wa Gharb; Rujūla wa ʿUnūtha*. (Beirut: Dār al-Ṭalīʿa lil-Ṭibāʿa wa al-Nashr, 1977) p. 17.

Muwayliḥ in *Ḥadīth ʿĪsā bin Hishām* (1906) in the Egyptian protagonist’s criticism leveled at the pseudo-Westernized children of the ruling class, who are steeped in the materiality of the west, but lack any rigorous education. *Qindīl Umm Hāshim* explores a similar type self-criticism through medicine, highlighting the divide between the importation of Western medical advancements and the hold of local superstitions. Other texts have inserted Western characters into their narratives to imbed layers of self-criticism, and occasional praise, through the didactic monologues of these Westerners. ʿAlī Mubārak started this rhetorical ploy in Arabic in his voluminous *ʿAlam al-Dīn*, published in 1882, which features conversations between his protagonist and an Englishman. As Rasheed al-Enany aptly suggests, “it is obvious that ʿAlī Mubārak [the protagonist] is using the Englishman to make his own case.”¹⁴ Tawfīq al-Ḥakīm utilizes this dynamic in novels on the encounter set in rural Egypt, as in *ʿAwdat al-Rūḥ* (*Return of the Spirit*, 1933), and abroad in Paris, in *ʿUṣfūr min al-Sharq* (*Bird from the East*, 1938). In *ʿAwdat al-Rūḥ* a French archaeologist is inserted into the narrative to offer a romantic reading of Egyptian civilization which doubles as a critical take on the lack of modern progress in the country. Sulaymān’s Fayyāḍ’s *ʿAṣwāt* (*Voices*, 1972) reinterprets this narrative ploy by focusing his novel on the homecoming of a local son and his French wife Simone, set in a rural Egyptian village. The criticism of the Egyptian self emerges here less from Simone’s monologue, than how the villagers react to her presence, ending in a violent scene where the village women perform a circumcision on Simone, during which she dies. From didactic monologues blurring lines between fictional characters and the author’s critical discourse, to enactments of dramatic violence, the Western

¹⁴ El-Enany, Rasheed, *Arab Representations of the Occident; East-West Encounters in Arabic Fiction* (New York: Routledge, 2006), p. 26.

character is often a narrative device through which the Arab self is contested and 'retrograde' social and cultural practices are exposed and questioned.

The potency of the criticism injected into texts on the East-West encounter is only fortified by the realistic mode of narration that most of these texts adopt. The adaptation and adoption of narrative forms from the West into Arabic meant that many new modes of narration entered the Arab literary sphere simultaneously, whereas they had developed more organically and contextually in the West. While romanticism certainly held favor among many Arab writers, especially in poetry, it would be the realist mode, with its reliance on depictions of everyday life and verisimilitude that would dominate in modern tales of East-West encounter.¹⁵ One reason for the realist mode dominating the fiction of encounter is the autobiographical impulse present in so many of these texts. In the realm of prose fiction, novels are often based on a real encounter or trip to the West by the author. As for non-fiction, in the vein of Ṭaḥṭāwī's *Takhlīṣ al-ʿIbrīz*, the encounter emerges through a combination of memoir and autobiography, a trend continuing through the 20th century in examples such as Moroccan author ʿAbd al-Majīd bin Jallūn's *Fī al-Ṭufūla* (*In Childhood*, 1957) and Raḍwā ʿĀshūr's *al-Riḥla* (*The Journey*, 1984) which will be analyzed in this dissertation. Altogether many of these narratives end up blurring the lines between fiction, travelogue, and autobiography. For example, in many fictional narratives of the encounter it is easy to identify the sympathetic character inserted into the narrative in the likeness of the author, advocating many of the author's known views on politics and society.¹⁶ The realist mode acts in concert with the political and social

¹⁵ For a lengthy discussion on the techniques of realism and their introduction and adaptation into modern Arabic literature see Sabry Hafez, *The Quest for Identities* (London: Saqi, 2007) p. 73-88.

¹⁶ For more on this notion on authorial ideology inserted into realist works see Muhammad Siddiq, *Arab Culture and the Novel*, p. 178.

criticism interlaced into this literature; the two combine in an effort to affect change and cope with the anguish that the colonial and postcolonial relationship has wrought.

Many of the general motifs of the East-West encounter with Europe will make the journey across the Atlantic to American shores, where they are incorporated, reinterpreted, and adapted. But America offers a wide cast of new landscapes and peoples, not to mention the fact that these uniquely American locations and individuals are frequently sublimated into the ideas and literary paradigms when America is encountered in Arabic. Here I will outline some of these important shifts and contributions in order to lay the groundwork for the particularly American literary history of the East-West encounter in Arabic.

The sheer distance between America and the Arabic speaking world has been influential in shaping this literary history. Distance is encoded in the term used to refer to Arabs who emigrated to the Americas. The word *Mahjar*, used to refer to immigration and emigration, is a multivalent term in Arabic, evoking both the historical emigration in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, and referring to the literary movement established by Arabs in the Americas, North and South. As Leyla Dekhli explains of this term:

The *Mahjar*, a migration, a world of immigrants, a diaspora that quickly became synonymous with the *Nahḍa* of the intellectual community; so much so that the word *Mahjar*, which first pointed to the social reality of exile, but also a certain anchoring despite the distance, ended up referring to an intellectual trend (*adab al-mahjar*), a way to position oneself in the intellectual landscape, even a certain type of writing in Arabic.¹⁷

¹⁷ Dakhli, Leyla. "The Mahjar as Literary and Political Territory in the First Decades of the Twentieth Century", in *The Making of the Arab Intellectual*, Dyala Hamzah ed. (New York: Routledge, 2012), p. 165.

Hence the literary movement is affixed to the distance that migration fundamentally evokes. This distance from the cosmopolitan and literary centers of the Arab world had the affect of liberating Arab poets and authors in the *Mahjar* of the United States from the 'conservative literary constraints' of the Arab world; these writers experimented with free verse and romanticism, terms which have become deeply associated with the *Mahjar* literature.¹⁸ While this dissertation will not study the well-known poetry of the *Mahjar* writers, it is important to recognize the tremendous liberation in form and content that this poetry actualized, representing a liberation from tradition that fostered an excitement in literary circles, abroad and in the homeland. The impulse towards innovation was extended to the prose of the *Mahjar* as well. For example, when ʿAbd al-Massīḥ Ḥaddād began writing short stories in Arabic composed of Arab characters contemplating their new American surroundings - the first such stories of their kind in Arabic - he was immediately encouraged by his close friend Kahlil Gibran to continue this innovative literary pursuit. The result of this encouragement is one of the prose collections to be studied here.

The geographical distance that marked the *Mahjar* experience in America can also be understood in distinction from Europe, and the history of European colonialism in the Arab world. Britain, France and Italy were not only geographically much closer than America, but for long periods of time in the 19th and 20th centuries their colonial administrators were present in the colonies, in positions of power. Therefore the European trajectory of the East-West encounter is reflective of issues surrounding social and cultural proximity and interaction, along with the subsequent resistance to the

¹⁸ For more on this relationship between free verse poetics and the *Mahjar* writers see Jayyusi, Salma Khadra. *Trends and Movements in Modern Arabic Poetry*. Vol. 1. Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1977.

colonizers; the North African example evincing numerous layers of complexity due to the French cultural and linguistic investment in the colonies. The fact that America did not have a history of colonialism in the Arab world only underscores the psychological distance between the two regions. In fact, the perception of America for the first half of the 20th century was overall positive, especially after World War I, when President Wilson's Fourteen Points were evoked as an ethical and legal justification for the independence of Arab nations. Later, in the wake of World War II this positive perspective began to sour, highlighted by American support for the newly created nation of Israel. As the American Empire rose and asserted herself on the world stage in the second half of the 20th century many in the Arab world understood America to be taking the reigns from the previous European colonizers, in terms of economic control, military intervention, and in the general aversion to, or misunderstanding of, Islam.

Fast-forward to the present day, and the tension and resentment towards America would of course only become more acute following the invasions of Iraq and Afghanistan following the September 11th attacks. As Muḥammad Badawī writes of recent times, “Arabs feel that everything America does appears to be directed as a part of a war against them. In the latest crisis [the 2003 invasion of Iraq] the historical misunderstanding between the two cultures had become clear, as the injured American lion lashes out in order to restore his standing and confirm his superiority.”¹⁹ Badawī's comments make clear how perceptions have changed over time, and the sense of distance and aloofness that constituted the perceptions of America in the early 20th century has given way to a

¹⁹ Badawī, Muḥammad. *Laʿb al-Kitāba . . . Laʿb al-Siyāsa*. (Cairo: Mīrīt lil-Nashr wal-Maʿlūmāt, 2003), p. 67. This quotation does gloss over different reactions to the American invasions by Arabs of diverse national and denominational origins, but the generalization present in the quote does speak to certain dominant sentiments.

dramatic preoccupation with American foreign policy, economic reach, and cultural engagement in the wider world, for better or worse. In more recent cases, like Iraq, America has in fact invaded and temporarily colonized, evoking comparisons to former European colonizers.

Part of the story of the American encounter from the late 19th until the 21st century has been the contraction of the psychological distance between America and the Arab world, as America has shifted from the global periphery to form a new center. That said, due to the particular historical circumstances between European and American interactions with the Arab world, the legacy of colonialism in particular, there still seems to be less of a threshold of knowledge about America. Writing about Europe and Europeans assumes a level of knowledge and familiarity resultant of the shared colonial history. America, on the other hand, continues to be surprising and unfamiliar terrain, a fact apparent in the literature studied in this dissertation. In nearly every work analyzed in this dissertation there is a didactic urge in which the fiction and fictive memoirs double as an anthropological or historic vehicle in educating its Arab audience.

While the American presence in the Arab world was historically less tangible in the early part of the 20th century, America was certainly present in the collective imaginary. The so-called ‘American Dream’ of wealth and prosperity is a primary association with which many Arab writers contend. This notion was often buttressed by the global spread of Hollywood cinema and its dazzling films in the early 20th century. The literary encounter with America therefore had to contend with the apparent disconnect between *two* Americas, the imagined America, and the reality that Arab émigrés, students and professionals would encounter over the years. There is a strong

corollary for this process among other literatures confronting America, as Richard Ruland's work on America as a metaphor in the European imaginary emphasizes the fact that America was invented as an 'idea' and 'image' prior to the real experience; America as an imagined place was an extension of Europeans hopes and dreams, but this imagined idea or image would not conform to the reality that Europeans faced once reaching American shores.²⁰ Among the Arab community this disconnect between the imaged and the real America played out as well, as the *Mahjar* period authors would turn their critical eye towards negative aspects of society, such as American consumer culture or the mechanization of daily life, since these realities did not meet their prefigured expectations. In the post-World War II era, as American foreign policy took a hostile stance towards the interests of many Arab nations, the America of dreams and movies was often revealed in literature to be a "deceptive mirage" (*sarāb khādi*).²¹ The American dream would often be cast as an American nightmare in the literary experience, inverting preconceptions in the process melding the imagination with lived realities. The nightmare motif is often utilized to accentuate the intense disconnect between dream and reality, producing a level of narrative dramatization.

An interesting trend that develops in texts on the American encounter from the second half of the 20th century is to undercut the dream imagery by taking a probing look into the American reality and its social problems. °Abdallah Ghidhāmi has characterized this effort as looking beyond the coherent exterior picture that America attempts to

²⁰ Ruland, Richard. *American in Modern European Literature; From Image to Metaphor*. (New York: NYU Press, 1976).

²¹ Badawī, Muḥammad. *La°b al-Kitāba . . . La°b al-Siyāsa*. (Cairo: Mīrīt lil-Nashr wal-Ma°lūmāt, 2003), p. 75.

present to the world, and into the fissures and cracks within this American Empire.²²

Mara Naaman's analysis of Sun'allah Ibrāhīm's *Amrīkānlī*, a novel that I will take up in Chapter 4, understands this process of Arabs writing America by focusing on America's 'jagged terrain,' where she is referring to novel's interest in revealing America's poor and neglected peoples and neighborhoods.²³ Interest in America's imperfections can be understood as a reaction to the sense of unity and confidence that this imperial power has attempted to cast into the world. The contradictions and fragility of American social space is revealed, especially in late 20th century literature, challenging the projection of national and cultural homogeneity.

Whether repositioning from the American dream to nightmare, or cohesion to contradiction in writing America in Arabic, these are methods of dealing with the confusing complexity and hybridity that America presents. As Edward Said states in his introduction to *Culture and Imperialism* (1994):

Before we can agree on what the American identity is made of, we have to concede that as an immigrant settler society superimposed on the ruins of considerable native presence, American identity is too varied to be a unitary and homogenous thing; indeed the battle within it is between advocates of a unitary identity and those who see the whole as a complex but not reductively unified one.²⁴

As this quote confirms, the complexity of America, on so many levels, can be baffling. Where the European encounter was so often neatly divided between the Arab self and British or French other, where both self and other shared a level of historical familiarity, as well as national and ethnic unity, the American encounter would inevitably realize that

²² Ghidhāmī, 'Abdallāh. *Rihla ilā Jumhuriyya Nazariyya: Muqārana li-Qir'at Wajh Amrikā al-Thaqāfi*. (Aleppo: Markaz al-'Inmā' al-Ḥadārī, 1998) p. 119.

²³ Naaman, Mara. "American Undone; Sonallah Ibrahim's Imperial Investigations". *Alif: Journal of Comparative Poetics*, No. 26, 2006, p. 75.

²⁴ Said, Edward. *Culture and Imperialism*, (New York: Knopf, 1994), p. xxv.

neither of these conventions could be assumed. Confronting the complexity and hybridity of America, and reacting to these diverse peoples and geographies, is certainly one of the most exciting and challenging aspects of this literary encounter.

The History of Arab Contact with America

Literature has a dialogical relationship with the historical context from which it is formed, and the American encounter is certainly no exception. It was indeed the real experience of emigration in the late 19th and early 20th century, and then subsequent migration and temporary stays that form the historical background and real motivations for the literature analyzed in this dissertation. In addition, the different types of movement between the Arab world and America form multiple layers of experience, most notably between those who settled and became Arab Americans, and those whose presence in America was temporary. While the literature of the encounter in Arabic is primarily drawn from authors who *did not* settle in America, their reflections on America incorporates a wide range of Arab experiences. It is crucial, therefore, to briefly outline this historical encounter as it is part of the experiential canvas from which the Arab authors drew inspiration.

The first wave of Arab emigration to America began towards the end of the 19th century and lasted up until World War I. This wave was dominated by Arabic-speaking inhabitants of the Ottoman Empire, specifically the population of modern day Lebanon and Syria, with the heaviest influx of émigrés coming from the Mount Lebanon region. While the population of modern day Lebanon will often romanticize their insatiable wanderlust and wayfaring Phoenician origins, there were many waves of historic

emigrations emanating from this region to justify this perspective. Coupled with the wanderlust, real or imagined, were a series of historic circumstances in the late 19th century that initiated emigration to America from this region. Firstly, the economy of Mount Lebanon had struggled since the opening of the Suez Canal in 1869, which shifted trade routes further south. Add to these mercantile woes, a silkworm blight around this same time that devastated this once-lucrative industry. To make matters worse, the region was pervaded by a sense of insecurity resultant of serious sectarian violence circa 1860. These varied realities acted as mobilizing impetuses for a population already historically susceptible to movement and migration.

This Mount Lebanon region was heavily populated by Christian denominations, hence the earliest Arab émigrés to America were overwhelmingly Maronite and Eastern Orthodox. While the decision to emigrate to America was of course different for each individual, the dominant motivations were threefold: America was gaining a reputation for the economic opportunities it offered; religious persecution was not uncommon due to the minority status of the Christian populations in the Ottoman Empire; and political repression at the hands of the Ottoman administrators was increasingly common. While many from the region emigrated within the Arabic-speaking Ottoman Empire to Egypt, others were more adventurous in heading across the Atlantic to join relatives or chase their dreams. As Ami Ayalon's research on the press in the Arab world reveals, the fact is, little was known about America in the Arab world in the late 19th century, but despite this vacuum of genuine knowledge, popular stories about substantial economic opportunities and religious freedom were clearly impactful.²⁵

²⁵ Ayalon, Ami. "The Arab Discovery of America in the 19th Century." *Middle Eastern Studies*, Vol. 20, No. 4, Oct. 1984.

The Arab émigrés to America ended up settling in large numbers in Lower Manhattan, leaving a visible mark on New York's urban landscape. An area of Washington Street became known as 'Little Syria', a moniker identifying this group through their Levantine origins and *not* their Ottoman rulers. While Lower Manhattan became a central locale tying this community to a particular place, it was actually the overwhelming transience of this Arab community and predominant profession of peddling that marked this first generation of émigrés. This profession became emblematic of the conception that many Arab émigrés held, that one's presence in America was based on short-term economic gain, while the goal remained to accumulate wealth and return home. The transition from conceiving of America as a place of temporary residence versus an adopted home was gradual, spanning the first couple of decades of the 20th century, and evidenced by the founding of churches, schools and a vibrant Arabic press.²⁶ In this transition from the 'peddling' to the 'settled' period, as characterized by Alixa Naff, the Arab community in America largely maintained its insularity through inter-marriage and maintaining local and denominational bonds. This insularity was refracted through the denominational character of the Arabic press itself, which recreated divisions and animosities from the homeland. But this early population, who envisioned themselves as transient, and focused on the return home, was simultaneously solidifying and establishing roots in America. As Michael Suleiman points out, it was with the outbreak of World War I, when severe travel restrictions were imposed and the notion of return was seriously jeopardized, that the literal and

²⁶ Naff, Alixa. *Becoming American; The Early Arab Immigrant Experience*. (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1985) p 13.

psychological turning point came for this Arab community; the mentality shifting from transience to permanence.²⁷

The literature that emerged from this early period embodied many of the historical experiences constituting this community. The liberation from religious persecution and political repression that emigration represented was powerfully echoed in the innovative poetry of the period, which broke through the strictures of Arabic meter and prosody revealing experimentations in free verse. The poets like Kahlil Gibran, Mikhāʿil Nuʿayma, Nasīb ʿĀrīḍa, and ʿIlyā Abū Mādī were conscientiously trying to change the modern Arabic literary form, attempting to “lift it from the quagmire of stagnation.”²⁸ Whether or not the Arabic poetry and prose was caught in a ‘quagmire of stagnation’ in the early 20th century is a suspect proposition at best, but this group certainly held this perspective as a rallying cry in defense of their innovative literary production in Arabic. The thematic content reflected a literary liberation as well, as these poets railed against the hierarchy of the clergy, the corruption of the Ottomans, and the repression of women. In addition, the transient mentality that set its gaze on the homeland was palpable in this poetry, as evinced by the heavy reverberations of nostalgia therein, in tandem with romanticized depictions of the homeland. As Hādiya Ramaḍān comments in her work on the *Mahjar* literature, this writing rarely depicts America, as it is concentrated almost exclusively on reimagining a romanticized Arab home.²⁹ The literary imaginary developed by the writers of the *Mahjar* was in a state of flux; it internalized apparent contradictions,

²⁷ Suleiman, Michael. *Arabs in America; Building a New Future*. (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1999), p. 5.

²⁸ Ludescher, Tanyss. “From Nostalgia to Critique; An Overview of Arab-American Literature”, *MELUS*, Vol. 31, No. 4, 2006, p. 95.

²⁹ Ramaḍān, Hādiya ʿIḥsān. *al-Fann al-Qiṣaṣī fī al-Mahjar*. (Cairo: al-Majlis al-ʿAḍlā lil-Thaqāfa, 2008), p. 9.

such as its liberation from traditional aesthetics values, while remaining tightly attached to representing the homeland, as transience allowed for certain aesthetic freedoms, but links to the past implied a yearning for permanence, still represented through home. The influence of the *Mahjar* poetry from America spread quickly and gained a following in the homeland, as romantic poets like Gibran and °Ariḍa influenced the likes of Abū Qāsim al-Shābbī in Tunisia and Muṣṭafā Luṭfī al-Manfalūṭī in Egypt.³⁰

The middle decades of the 20th century were a very different experience for Arabs in America in comparison to this early phase. Not only did World War I initiate a shift in perspective towards remaining in America, but the United States immigration reforms of 1924 resulted in a near end to new waves of Arab immigration to the United States, effectively curbing the constant cultural and linguistic rejuvenation of this community, and its direct connection to Arab roots and traditions. The fact is, as one historian of the period has noted, the early Arab community of émigrés nearly “assimilated themselves out of existence.”³¹ This comment reflects the powerful influence of the assimilative forces upon all immigrants to America at the turn of the century, perhaps weighing particularly heavy on the early Arab community, especially given their dispersal and general transience through peddling activities. Signs of the assimilative forces even emerged in a brief glimpse at the literary scene, the primary shift being that many Arabs lost touch with their native language. The vibrant Arabic presses that featured a wide range of publications in the first two decades began to dwindle. One Arab publisher,

³⁰ Both Abū Qāsim al-Shābbī and Muṣṭafā Luṭfī al-Manfalūṭī, Tunisian and Egyptian, respectively, were writers well known for their employment of romantic verse in their prose and poetry. Al-Shābbī’s *Ilā Tughāh al-°Ālam* (*To the Tyrants of the World*) and al-Manfalūṭī’s *al-°Abarāt* (*Lessons*) are two prime example of the *Mahjar*-influenced romantic writing.

³¹ Majaj, Lisa Suhair. “Arab-American Ethnicity: Locations, Coalitions, and Cultural Negotiations” in *Arabs in America; Building a New Future*, ed. Michael Suleiman (1999), p. 321.

Sallūm Mukarzal, began editing *The Syrian World* in 1926, a publication written in English, aimed at informing a younger generation of Arabs, seemingly disconnected from their past, about their ancestral home.³² This separation from one's heritage was clear in some of the writings in English by Americans of Arab origin, like William Blatty's *Which Way to Mecca, Jack* (1960), a book that evinced no real connection to the author's Arab origins.³³

The middle decades of the 20th century had little to offer in the way of literary expression penned in Arabic. That said, Sayyid Qutb's polemic travelogue to America, *Amrīkā min al-Dākhil*, based on his travels around the country in 1948, while hardly a literary text, does have larger implications for the nature of the encounter with America. Qutb was sent to America by the Egyptian government in order to study education and pedagogy, in hopes of reforming the Egyptian curriculum upon return. Qutb had no interest in implementing American educational standards, as his American experience steered him towards the desire to implement a completely Islamic education. In America, he was revolted by what he judged to be American immorality, vapid consumerism, and a soulless population. Qutb's polemics are an extreme view of a new twist in the relationship between America and the Arab world; that being the growing sense of hostility that would emerge between the two regions in the second half of the 20th century. The polemic would be a common genre in writing America, especially in editorial and political writing, as the expectations of many in the Arab world, who once

³² Wail Hassan discusses Mukarzal's innovative publication in more detail in: Hassan, Wail. *Immigrant Narratives; Orientalism and Cultural Translation in Arab-American and Arab-British Literature*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), p. 19.

³³ Tanyss Ludescher makes this claim of Blatty's work in "From Nostalgia to Critique; An Overview of Arab-American Literature", *MELUS*, Vol. 31, No. 4, 2006, p. 99. Blatty would make a name for himself writing *The Exorcist* in 1971.

associated America with Wilson's idealistic Fourteen Points and liberation from forms of oppression at home, were beginning to see closer resemblances to the regions' former colonizers.

While the first wave of Arab emigration to America in the late 19th and early 20th centuries is accorded a sense of homogeneity in terms of the geographical emigration patterns and economic causality, the emigration and immigration of Arabs to America in the second half of the 20th century was far more diverse. After World War II Arabs from all across the Middle East and North Africa came to America as immigration policies softened. These Arabs not only represented many nations, but represented many different religious backgrounds as well. While economic opportunity was still a primary factor for many who left home, fleeing violence and conflict was another factor that has displaced Arabs over recent decades. In addition, one of the largest multinational contingents of Arab immigrants to America after World War II, in sharp distinction from the early peddlers, were educated Arabs seeking advanced educational and professional opportunities. As Sharon Abu-Laban relates, "for the first time there was a large proportion of educated, Westernized, mostly male, English-speaking students and professionals – including Palestinians, Egyptians, Iraqis and Syrians."³⁴ The dominance of this particular sector among the Arab immigrant population is an important shift in the encounter with America, as this educated cast came to America linguistically, culturally and intellectually prepared to engage with American society, and far more aware of the American other. It is this exact group of professionals, students and intellectuals that, not

³⁴ Sharon Abu-Laban details the history of Arab migration to America with a focus on adaptation and identity issues in her article "The Coexistence of Cohorts" found in the edited volume: Abu-Laban, Baha and Michael Suleiman, editors. *Arab Americans: Continuity and Change*. (Belmont, MA: The Association of Arab-American University Graduates, 1989), p. 52.

surprisingly, dominate the cast of characters in the Arabic fictional encounter throughout late 20th century.

America in the 1960s was a particularly instructive time in understanding the new historical contours of the Arab experience therein, for both new immigrants and those who came to identify themselves as Arab American. The American social and cultural landscape was highly politicized during this time period; the civil rights movement, resistance to the Vietnam War, and the modern women's right movement all contributed to this charged American political landscape. The intensity of political identifications galvanized the Arab community in America as well, leading to the founding of the first organizations based on promoting and defending the interests of this community. The Association of Arab-American University Graduates (AAUG) was founded in 1967, and other associations would follow, including the Arab-American Anti-Discrimination Committee in 1980. What is particularly fascinating about the timing of this community's attempts to cohere in America in the 60s, is that 1967 also marks a momentous event in the Arab world, this being the Six-Day War. The fallout of this brief war has major political, ideological and psychological implications for the region, initiating the demise of Pan-Arab nationalism, and the dream of Arab unity. Therefore, the inclusivity and sense of coherence that Arabs of different national and religious backgrounds were attempting to initiate in America did not necessarily align with the diverse and potentially divisive ideological, sectarian or ethnic identifications and affiliations of newly arrived Arab immigrants and professionals. The term 'Arab' in America was an umbrella term covering a wide diversity of peoples. As Michael Suleiman states of the Arab American community of this period, which is certainly true

for visitors and immigrants alike, “Arab Americans are reminded of their Arabness, regardless of what part of the Arab world they come from *and* regardless of how strong or weak their attachment to Arabism happens to be.”³⁵ This reality was only intensified by discrimination this group faced in America, as this discrimination was directed at Arabs and others perceived to be Arab, irrespective of national, ethnic, or religious affiliations. America was proving to be an extremely challenging terrain to navigate one’s competing affiliations.

The questions surrounding how the Arab community identified itself, and how America, in turn, identified this community, is part of the perplexing legacy of this encounter. The confusion surrounding these identifications is a product of different ways of classifying individuals. In America, this process has been historically mediated through racial and ethnic classification, whereas different regions of the Arabic speaking world have shown a preference for linguistic, religious and cultural markers as primary. The earliest confusion arose amongst the first wave of émigrés, who preferred the term ‘Syrian’ over the attempt, often successful, to classify them as Turks. These slippery and ambiguous distinctions eventually found their way into the courts, as a 1914 South Carolina court case ruled that Syrians “were not that particular free white person to whom the Act of Congress [1970] had denoted the privilege of citizenship.”³⁶ This legal ruling was since abrogated, but it reveals the challenges faced by the Arab community in America; a country incapable of easily classifying a group of immigrants that was not clearly white or black. Arabs have faced official discrimination, as this early court case

³⁵ This quotation is from Michael Suleiman’s introduction to the book he co-edited: Abu-Laban, Baha and Michael Suleiman, editors. *Arab Americans: Continuity and Change*. (Belmont, MA: The Association of Arab-American University Graduates, 1989), p. 5.

³⁶ Naber, Nadine. “Ambiguous Insiders; An Investigation of Arab American Invisibility,” in *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, Vol. 23, No 1, January 2000, p. 39.

reveals, but also other forms of discrimination over time, based on their skin color, derogatory Orientalist ideas of their origins, and most recently, religious discrimination against Muslims, a term which is often erroneously interchangeable with ‘Arab’ in America. As Suad Joeseph has written, the upshot of this confusion over race and identity, is that “there is an enduring representation of “Arab-” as not quite American – not quite free, not quite white, not quite male, not quite persons in the civil body of the nation.”³⁷ This perplexing reality for Arab Americans and Arab émigrés and immigrants becomes a preoccupation of the literature of the American encounter, as an essential element of this literature is to identify one’s place and position within the confusing spectrum of identification that America forces the author and her characters to contemplate.

The assimilationist impulse in America has always coexisted with an impulse to retain one’s connection to home through traditions, language, and familial bonds. The Arab community has experienced a particularly taxing transition due to discrimination, which has reared its head in different forms over the 20th century and beyond. This discrimination ranges from the unsavory depictions of Arabs in American film, as Jack Shaheen’s tome on the depictions of Arabs in cinema, *Reel Bad Arabs* (2001) will attest, to attacks on mosques and people who even ‘looked’ Arab in the wake of September 11th. In a sense, Arabs have led a double life in America. On the one hand, they take pride in being an essential part of America’s multi-ethnic fabric reaching back more than a century, despite the fact that since 1967, they have often been considered an internal enemy. On the other hand, many Arabs take pride in their origins, their religions, and

³⁷ Joeseph, Suad. “Against the Grain of Nation – The Arab,” in Suleiman, Michael, ed. *Arabs in America; Building a New Future* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1999), p. 257.

their rich culture. The trend in America toward celebrating multiculturalism, which came to the fore in the 1980s, has empowered this group to celebrate both the Arab and American aspects of their identity. And the balancing act of maintaining multiple affiliations is actually becoming easier through travel and technology. As El-Sayed el-Aswad relates in his study of identity reconstruction in Arab communities in America, “technology and communication has allowed for globalizing strategies accounting for transnational circuits of culture, identity, and capital.”³⁸ We may yet fully understand the impact of new technologies for the immigrant experience in America, but it is clear that the interconnectivity that new technologies allow means that one’s connection to home, when abroad, can actually be maintained much easier than in the past. The intense nostalgia and alienation that was such a hallmark of the writers of the first generation, emerging from the disconnect from the homeland, is a separation that is now far less palpable. Immigrants and second or third generation Arab Americans today can cultivate, and more easily maintain, a double perspective accommodating pride in their origins and their lived American reality due to multiculturalism’s influence and technological advances. As el-Aswad writes of the notion of this double identity, “it is not a matter of divided loyalty leading to a split personality as some intellectuals might think, but rather a matter of longing for roots, real or imagined, in the homeland and full acceptance in the new land. Double identity encompasses a form of double or transnational belonging.” Negotiations of these circuits of transnational belonging by Arab Americans and Arab immigrants, not surprisingly, proliferate in recent works of Arabic literature on the encounter, as Sunallah Ibrahim’s *Amrīkānlī* (2002) and Alaa al-

³⁸ El-Aswad, el-Sayed. “The Dynamic of Identity Reconstruction among Arab Communities in the United States” in *Anthropos*, Bd. 10H. 1, (2006) p. 118.

Aswani's *Shīkāghū* (2008), the subjects of chapter four will attest. Both of these novels exhibit an implicit recognition of the transnational character of an Arab immigrant's identity.

This brief run through the history of the first Arab émigrés to America through the subsequent generations who settled, in addition to the recent immigrant experience, gives a sense of the challenges this community has faced. The literature that emerges from these different periods responds to these challenges of identification, as well as the antagonisms and benevolence that Arabs have faced in America. In some cases this literary response can be polemical and dismissive towards America; essentially a tempered version of Sayyid Qutb's invective against America discussed above. This tendency is a common thread in the writing of displaced populations, as writers representing the displaced population will valorize their culture and history and devalorize the culture and history of the 'Other.'³⁹ Yet this binary is frequently complicated by the fact that distance from the homeland can frequently lead to railing against political and economic injustices at home, creating multiple planes of criticism and praise, directed both at the homeland and the cultural other, sometimes at the same time.

Another trend that runs through the literature of the encounter is transforming the anxieties over difference experienced in America into literary nightmares. This is only amplified in America due to the frequent disconnect between American racial and ethnic

³⁹ Wen-Chin Ouyang writes on this phenomenon in her work on Etel Adnan, where she writes: "In the travel writing of exiled people we often find the discursive opening of a new space; while the history of the writer and his culture is valorized, the history of the colonized, the cultural other, is devalorized." Ouyang, Wen-Chin. "From Beirut to Beirut: Exile, Wandering and Homecoming in the Narratives of Etel Adnan" in Lisa Suhair Majaj and Amal Amireh, editors. *Etel Adnan; Critical Essays on the Arab-American Writer and Artist*. (Jefferson, NC: McFarland and Co., 1999) p. 69-79.

labels that are counterintuitive to how this Arab community and the individuals within it see themselves. The nightmare is born from this experience of difference. The fact is, many different outcomes will be represented in this literature, as the historical realities of this experience become transformed by, and into, the literary experience.

Theoretical Trajectories of the Encounter

The theoretical issues present in analyzing a body of Arabic literature that has emerged from a cross-cultural experience are manifold, to say the least. The theoretical approach presented here will therefore be selective, in further investigating aspects of identity and identification. As became clear through the summaries of the history of the Arab experience in America as well as the literary history of the East-West encounter in Arabic prose, identity and issues of identification are critical components of this historical relationship. The intellectual effort to understand and theorize the encounter between cultures has been immense, and solving the puzzle of identity and identification has been an obsession amongst literary theorists, especially in the 20th century, where investigations of the individual and his affiliative process has been crucial to the study of nationalism, multiculturalism, and psychology, to name just a few disciplines. In addition to relying on some of the early contributions to travel theory, from James Redfield's seminal article on Herodotus through Marie Lousie Pratt's work on the Contact Zone, heavy debt will be paid to theorization of identity found in Stuart Hall's important interrogations, Homi Bhabha's work on hybridity, and Susan Friedman's writing on the geographics of identity. In citing the ideas of these authors I hope to present a rich framework through which we can explore the complicated and contentious

process through which authors construct Arab subjectivities and Arab experiences in a place that is not their own. Interpretive questions surrounding how we write and ‘see’ the other, how a minority or a minor literature can establish authority, and the negotiation of power dynamics, are some of the important aspects of the process of identification to be explored.

The encounter with a foreign people and their culture is an age-old trope in the literary experience of the world. When James Redfield’s article *Herodotus The Tourist* was published in 1985 it articulated many insights that apply across the spectrum of cross-cultural encounters. Redfield noticed that as Herodotus began to describe the Libyans he encountered on his trip in the 5th century, the descriptions began to reveal much more about Herodotus’ own Greek culture and origins, than they did about the Libyans. The foreign other was described through Herodotus’s very subjective experience and descriptive apparatus. This ancient Greek’s fascination with what he considered the strange habits of the Libyans makes the reader keenly aware of the *nomoi* of the Greeks, and what they found culturally acceptable and moral. As Redfield suggests, “The more ethnocentric his [Herodotus] interests, the better they define his culture.”⁴⁰ Herodotus was one of the first ethnographers of the ancient world, and every writer-observer who follows in his path in recording their observations of a foreign place or people, whether through autobiography or literary renderings, is involved in this practice of producing a subjective imprint of this other; revealing more about the ‘observing self’ than the ‘observed other.’ In applying this situation to the Arab characters traveling west to America, the most appropriate subject of interrogation is not

⁴⁰ Redfield, James. “Herodotus the Tourist.” *Classical Philology*, Vol. 8, No. 2 (April 1985), p. 98.

the American other depicted, but the Arab self who judges, reacts and interacts with Americans and America.

The ethnographic impulse in writing the encounter with a foreign people and place is not only subjective, it is further complicated by its reliance on sight and visual ephemera then recorded as cultural knowledge. The fact is, vision is also culturally mediated and does not impart knowledge in and of itself. As Kristi Siegel and Toni Wulff have written in connecting sight to its representation in travel writing:

While a culture's "reality" appears seductively accessible via vision, the traveler's view is always partial and biased. The vast number of unconsciously learned and assimilated beliefs, values, and norms that make up cultural patterns, the "mental programming" of any culture, remain veiled.⁴¹

The fallibility of sight and visual description in conveying any true knowledge about the other and their culture becomes an instructive warning in the process of interpreting this encounter in literature. The focus of investigation needs to be set on the observer / traveler, and a healthy dose of skepticism needs to be directed at descriptions that rely on vision. This theoretical insight is meaningful in this study of literary constructions in the Arab encounter with America, emphasizing the need to investigate the subjective sources of vision - the Arab narrators, protagonists and characters constructed – and ask questions about how and why particular descriptions, criticisms, or rationalizations of the other are utilized.

Writing that involves displacement, the natural state of this literature of encounter, is ideal literary terrain for a close examination of the intricate process of

⁴¹ Siegel, Kristi, ed. *Issues in Travel Writing; Empire, Spectacle and Displacement*. (New York: Peter Lang, 2002), p. 110.

identification of Arab subjectivities in America. Susan Friedman's writings on the spatial implications, or geographics, of identity have asserted: "Identity often requires some form of displacement – literal or figurative – to come to consciousness. Leaving home brings into being the idea of "home," the perception of identity as distinct from elsewhere."⁴² While Friedman's statement certainly recognizes the ability to reflect on a sense of displacement stationed within one's own society, the literal displacement of emigration and immigration features a transition to a foreign setting where the individual is forced to actively assess their selfhood against this new geography. Descriptions, judgments, self-questioning, and dialogues become textual fragments that can offer insight into the constituent components of this individual and how they begin to identify. Part of this identification process belies a basic human desire to make sense of the world, necessitating strategies of categorizing and configuring this new world that reveal the contours of self. Paul Smethurst has commented that "all travel writing is to some extent a heroic exercise to bring textual order to bear on the experience of heterotopia produced by travel."⁴³ Therefore, close attention must be paid to how the literature of the encounter creates a sense of textual order, in attempting to render the American other and its geography, whether a literary heterotopia or not, comprehensible.

Identity has been a fundamental concept of this theoretical conversation, but this term, and its definition, is very much the site of intense debate, made apparent by the growth in the field of identity studies. Over the course of the 20th century important paradigmatic shifts have taken place in how we conceive of identity that have moved

⁴² Friedman, Susan. *Mappings; Feminism and the Cultural Geographies of Encounter*. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1998) , p. 151.

⁴³ Kuehn, Julia and Paul Smethurst, eds. *Travel Writing, Form and Empire; The Poetics and Politics of Mobility*. (New York: Routledge, 2009), p. 7.

from solid cores and organic centers, towards the splitting and fragmentation of self heralded by modernism, and most recently towards the ever-shifting affiliations and the performance of self associated with post modernism. Certainly the increase in human mobility and interaction between cultures has contributed to this historical shift from an organic center towards an individual evincing a spectrum of positionalities and affiliations. Interactions and encounters across cultures inevitably bring difference to the foreground, and difference exposes identity to the dualistic logic of identifying *with* or identifying *against*. As Stuart Hall has stated, “throughout their careers, identities function as points of identification and attachment only *because* of their capacity to exclude, to leave out, to render ‘outside,’ abjected.”⁴⁴ The stable, organic identity begins to shed its stability and organicism as it works its way *through* difference, time and time again, as has reoccurred in the encounter with the other, be it through cultural encounters, national or ethnic resistance movements, and even wars. This fraught process of identification is a critical aspect of the Arab literary encounter with America over the 20th century, as centrifugal forces like the American multiethnic makeup meet centripetal forces like Arab nationalism. Careful attention will be paid here to how identity – understood as a process of identification – is constructed through time and space as characters attach and detach to different ideas, symbols, histories, and peoples.

The range of identifications that an Arab immigrant might experience in encountering America is profound, as a few examples will attest. On one end of the identification spectrum is Sayyid Qutb, previously mentioned, whose gaze is cast on America from a rejectionist perspective, everything he describes falls under the guise of

⁴⁴ Hall, Stuart and P. du Gay, eds. *Question of Cultural Identity*. (London: Sage, 1996), p. 17-18.

America's vile cultural values. Qutb's spectrum of identification revolts against America, not only to bind him to the cultural values of his native Egypt, but to cast him even further back in time towards identifications with originary Islamic values. On the other end of the spectrum is Egyptian American literary critic Ihab Hassan and his intense identification with America detailed in his autobiography *Out of Egypt* (1986). Hassan seemingly has no problem transitioning to life in America, and in fact writes himself *into* the American individualist narrative. In fact, Egypt is essentially written out of his narrative, as Ihab Hassan's identifications are transposed seamlessly onto American coordinates. Somewhere between these two extremes is the example of Edward Said. The title of Said's autobiography *Out of Place* (1999) sums up the core tension in his autobiography, preparing its reader for a diverse set of identifications; he is never home, always away, capable of identifying boldly with his Palestinian roots as well as his adoptive American home. As Caren Kaplan relates in *Questions of Travel* (1996), which preceded Said's autobiography but prefigures its identitarian flexibility, "that Said is now as renowned for his activism on Palestinian issues as he is for his literary criticism suggest that he is a multiply positioned critic; his reception is not homogeneous."⁴⁵ The spectrum of identification on display through the autobiographies of Arabs in their sojourn in America highlights modes and possibilities of identification informing the construction of fictional characters as well, as each character is faced with the identification conundrum, attempting to stabilize the self through identifications with and against both home and America.

⁴⁵ Kaplan, Caren. *Questions of Travel*. (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1996), p.113.

In investigating this process of identification of displaced subjectivities in fiction and in reality alike there are crucial points in any narrative that demand recognition and pause. Stuart Hall has used the term ‘suturing’ in his discourse on identity, which refers to those moments of temporary attachment to a subject position. Whether it is the articulation of a political, moral, or ideological stance, or even a connection to a place or person, the subject is joined, albeit temporarily, into a structure of meaning. This type of suturing is especially informative for displaced subjectivities, as it becomes a window into their identification process. Susan Friedman’s theorization of what she calls ‘cultural narratives’ appears to be an instance of this suturing within the larger structure of a particular narrative. Friedman understands ‘cultural narratives’ to be those stories from home, or about home, that are inserted into a larger narrative structure. Essentially these ‘cultural narratives’ perform a suturing of subjects to a particular version of the past, and a particular identification with this past, which can, of course, be multivocal and contradictory depending on how this cultural narrative and the subject’s identification to it relates to the larger structure of the narrative. In addition, the cultural narrative draws attention to itself, in that it initiates a pause in the main narration, what Friedman calls a ‘vertical dimension,’ understood as a narrative break if we conceptualize the narrative’s progression as being a horizontal line moving from an origin to final point. Literature of the encounter, as *New York 80*, *al-Rihla* and *Amrīkānī* will attest, have a strong tendency towards inserting these vertical ‘cultural narratives’ into the main narration. These cultural narratives are rich sites of meaning, and as Friedman states, “the task of the critic

involves decoding and contextualizing these discourses within the larger terrain of cultural and political history.”⁴⁶

The ‘cultural narrative’ is a formal device that becomes a rich site of meaning, but there is a risk in reading cultural narratives and any other identifications with home and tradition as fixed and unchanging identifications. We must be mindful, as Homi Bhabha reminds us in *Location of Culture*, that while sutures, cultural narratives and other narrative devices are meaningful points of identification to home and tradition, these identifications are themselves contingent and dependent on historical contexts. When Raḍwā ʿĀshūr invokes Rifāʿa al-Ṭaḥṭāwī in *al-Rihla*, for example, she renews his meaning for her own historical moment. We must avoid the desire to understand ethnic and cultural traits from home as representing a “fixed tablet of tradition.”⁴⁷ This warning is essentially a recognition that while displaced subjectivities will often experience the heterogeneity of their foreign environment as a fluid amalgamation of positionalities and ideologies, this same fluidity is present in the subjectivity’s homeland, whether the narrative recognizes it or not. The experience is especially pronounced in the urban American settings of the literature I will be analyzing, since the American settings of this literature confronts the writer and the novel’s cast of characters with an ethnic, religious, and ideological American urban heterogeneity par excellence. As characters attempt to make sense of the cultural hybridity of the American landscape, and reflect on their own cultural precepts and traditions, Bhabha’s warning requires that we remain skeptical of accepting any romanticization and dehistoricization of the past and present. Every nation attempts to impress a level of monoculturalism on its population, but travel literature is

⁴⁶ Friedman, Susan. *Mappings*. Previously Cited, p. 29.

⁴⁷ Bhabha, Homi. *The Location of Culture*. (New York: Routledge, 1994), p. 2.

constantly resisting monism through intercultural encounters and examinations. We must be mindful that while one's traditions and history can be mobilized in a literary text, like any other point of identification, to suture a character to a cultural reference point, this reference point has a temporality and contingency within the fluid and multiple identifications of the characters within the narrative.

In considering further the relationship between the East and West and the process of identification, it is crucial to recognize these literary experiments where cultures meet and clash as part of what Mary Louise Pratt has called a 'Contact Zone.' Pratt is concerned with those social spaces where cultures "grapple with one another, often in contexts of highly asymmetrical relations of power, such as colonialism, slavery, or the aftermaths as they are lived out in many parts of the world today."⁴⁸ While the relationship between the Arab world and America was not colonial, the rise of the American Empire in the 20th century is understood, by many in the region, as taking the reigns from the European powers after World War II. Writing about America, whether editorial or literary, especially beginning in the second half of the 20th century, must grapple with power relations that saw Arabs as citizens of what has been called the Third World, accompanied by the assumption that they are developing *towards* the First World, where America was often poised at the lead. The literary medium inherently became a 'contact zone,' and through this prism of perceived and real power, inferiority, and disadvantage, it is important to explore the process of identification within the literature.

Given the asymmetrical power relations of this contact zone featuring Arab writers and subjectivities in America, this small body of literature can be understood as

⁴⁸ Pratt, Mary Louise. *Imperial Eyes; Travel Writing and Transculturation*. (New York: Routledge, 1992), p. 34.

writing back to this American Empire from a minority, or marginalized, position.⁴⁹

Writing back is a multivalent concept, but at its core, it recognizes the fact that asymmetrical power relations between peoples and nations, especially through colonialism, have not only been political and economic in nature, but have involved a battle over representation and who controls the power to represent a people, culture and nation. Edward Said's *Orientalism* is the all-important text that initiated these important investigations into issues of cross-cultural representations, how they are formed, controlled, and deployed. Writing back to empire, on a fundamental level, involves retaking control of one's own representation, an act that can take many forms in literature. For example, the very act of producing a modern travel literature in the language of the colonized or formerly colonized, whether emanating from the autobiographical or fictional mode, enacts this retaking of representation. Given the fact that travel writing was a genre that emerged from a privileged and mobile European upper class, simply utilizing this genre within Arabic literature is a meaningful development that gives agency to the Arab subjects of travel. It must be recognized that there is a rich tradition of travel writing in Arabic from the classical period⁵⁰, but the texts of modern Arabic literature studied here are very conscientiously writing within, and often against, the American Empire.

In considering the concept of writing back within the identification process, the establishment of authority becomes crucial. Authority can refer to the act of authorship itself, as well as the authority being established in the very act of writing on travel and

⁴⁹ The concept of 'writing back' has been detailed in the book by Bill Ashcroft entitled *The Empire Writes Back; Theory and Practice in Post-Colonial Literatures*. (London; New York: Routledge, 2002, 2nd Ed.).

⁵⁰ I am referring here to a tradition that extends all the way back to the medieval period, as evinced by Ibn Jubayr's (1145-1217) *Rihlat Ibn Jubayr*, and Ibn Battuta's (1304-1377) famous travelogue.

cultural encounters from the weaker position within the asymmetrical power relationships in this contact zone. Authority also refers to the construction of subjectivities within the text, and how these characters gain a sense of ownership over their environment.

Considering the identification process from the perspectives of authority, authorizing, and empowering characters against their foreign locale recognizes the duality of identification; while our concern for the cultural narrative will be a prism through which texts are constantly contemplating their relationship to home, issues of authority focus on how these texts are simultaneously positioning themselves with/against their cross-cultural reality. How Arabic texts choose to construct, confirm, and question authority and power will be crucial to understanding the duality of the identification process.

Bhabha's work on this topic is again informative, as he writes of the importance of cultural engagement in a text that "seeks to authorize cultural hybridities that emerge in moments of historical transformation."⁵¹ In Raḍwa ʿAshūr's *al-Rihla*, for example, a section is dedicated to her protagonist's inscription of New York City, a process demonstrating the protagonist's ownership and authority over the place and experience, while also maintaining her cultural and political identifications with her native Egypt.

Uneven power dynamics also have implications for writing this encounter as regards the visual element of description and cognition that was previously discussed. From the perspective of nations who are considered to belong to the "third world" or to be "developing" the fact that America sits atop the global power dynamic, gives the sense that other nations and people need to develop *toward* this model. In fact, this very logic was an underpinning of President Sadat's *infitāḥ* policies in the 1970s. There is a real

⁵¹ Bhabha, Homi. *The Location of Culture*. (New York: Routledge, 1994), p. 2.

and perceived Americanization of the world, as this empire's tentacles reach out through material culture and military might. In this understanding of power, America is often *seen* as a futurity that other nations are charting a course towards. This particular American nuance accentuates the divides and fissures in the process of identification, as the sutures to home can be *seen* as reaching further back in time against the inevitable future that America represents. Again, these are reductive ways of conceptualizing geographies as temporalities, but they have an undeniable presence in the cross-cultural encounter. Since we have established that writing America in Arabic is very much about writing the Arab self, the question of identifying oneself across and through place, and time, is paramount.

The theoretical perspectives presented here emerge from abstracting two fundamental elements inherent to the Arabic literary encounters with America: the complicated process of displacement and the presence of asymmetrical power relations. These two elements are constantly present, sometimes in the foreground, other times in the background, as Arab characters negotiate their identifications across place and time.

Chapter 2: Texts of the *Mahjar*; Paradigms of Encounter

Early Fictional Prose Encounters

The purpose of this chapter is to revisit the earliest fictional encounters with America, as depicted by Arab authors who lived in America at the beginning of the twentieth century. The texts featured in this chapter represent a starting point for this dissertation's inquiry into how Arab writers represented America and how they constructed Arab subjectivities therein. These texts were written in the first two decades of the 20th century, a time when modern forms of fiction in Arabic were still at an early phase of development. This was a time when the production of modern prose was still struggling to challenge the hold of poetry over the Arab literary consciousness. Given this early phase of modern prose, and the Americas being a new literary terrain for Arab émigrés, the images, metaphors, and descriptions, not to mention the representations of the Arab Self and the American Other, capture the earliest literary examples of each element. Probing the early American encounter in Arabic literature will contribute to an understanding of the East-West encounter in modern Arabic fiction at its infancy. In addition, the themes and paradigms articulated in these works form a body of material that will be adapted and manipulated in the fictional explorations of America produced throughout the twentieth, and into the twenty-first century.

Simultaneous to the well-documented revolution in poetry that the *Mahjar* writers helped initiate in the early 20th century, a number of Arab writers in America were experimenting with other forms of literary expression, including the short story and novel, as well as literary criticism and philosophical essays. These innovative literary

endeavors were encouraged by the vibrant Arabic press that emerged in New York City around the turn of the century. As Aida Imangulieva relates of this press, “much space was devoted to creative writing, to articles that bravely criticized the stagnation in Arabic literature and to reviews of new works by Arab authors.”⁵² The geographic distance of these Arab *Mahjar* writers from the literary centers of the Arab world helped to encourage innovation, as they were undeterred by the reaction from conservative critics in the Arab world who policed literary culture. In addition, most Arab writers in America were exposed to foreign languages and literatures, which gave them access to different methods and styles that would influence their Arabic texts. In sum, the writers and prose works profiled in this chapter were very consciously experimenting in literary form and content. The fact is, these Arab writers found themselves in a unique situation in the early 20th century; far away from the homeland they were encouraged to experiment with their pens, and from this distance they had a local audience of fellow Arab émigrés, as well as with literary circles back home, keenly interested in their work.

In what follows I will present biographical sketches of three authors and then explore their fictional works. These fictional works are both short and long form prose constituting the earliest works penned by Arab authors in writing the American encounter. While there are myriad possibilities in exploring these texts, the focus here will highlight some of the more discernable paradigms that these texts create as early meditations on the East-West encounter. These texts represent a fascinating beginning to a new literary experience between the Arab World and its community in America.

⁵² Imangulieva, Aida. *Gibran, Rihani & Naimy; East-West Interactions in Early Twentieth-Century Arab Literature* (Oxford: Inner Farne Press, 2009): p. 21.

Ameen Rihani

Ameen Rihani was born in 1876 in the Lebanese village of Frieke, situated in the mountainous region northeast of Beirut. This region was part of the Ottoman Empire at this time. Adventure came calling early for Ameen, as his adolescence was interrupted at the age of twelve when he travelled with his uncle to New York City, his father joining them a short time later. Rihani attended school in New York to learn English, stopping after a year when he was deemed capable of helping his family in their business ventures. Biographical entries of Ameen Rihani point to an interesting adventure he undertook in 1895, at the age of 17, when he left New York City to join the Kansas City Theatre Troop, with whom he travelled for a summer, performing throughout the United States. This decision was clearly an offshoot of his burgeoning literary and theatrical interests, as he had been devouring the classics of English literature throughout his teenage years.

As a young man Ameen Rihani continued to pursue his intellectual interests, enrolling at New York University Law School in 1897. A sudden illness led to his withdrawal from law school and his return to his native Lebanon, on the advice of a doctor who attributed his illness to the distance from his native climate. This return trip would not hinder his intellectual drive, but invigorate it, as he took this opportunity to reacquaint himself with the Arabic language and its vast literature. He embarked upon a new intellectual journey that focused on reading the classic poets of Arabic literature. Rihani would come to hold the rationalist skeptic poet al-Ma^ʿarri (d. 1058) in the highest esteem. By his early twenties, Rihani was already imbibing the literary traditions of both the West, through English and French, and the East, through his native Arabic. His travels early in life, like his literary interests, actualized a synthesis of East and West.

When Rihani returned to New York City in 1899, after two years convalescing in Lebanon, he did not return to law school, but instead he began publishing his ideas in the various Arabic newspapers and journals that proliferated in turn of the century New York. Rihani's early essays were inspired by the reformist writing emanating from the Arab world, inspired by the likes of Muḥammad °Abdu and °Abd al-Raḥmān al-Kawākibī, adumbrating Rihani's own vision of social, moral and political reform for Ottoman Syria. Two of Rihani's foci included his criticism of the Ottoman Empire and its oppressive control over his homeland, as well as his criticism of the clerical establishment in the Greater Syrian homeland. Rihani not only set pen to paper on these topics, but would advocate his ideas in public forums, often lecturing to various societies in New York City. A lecture he delivered in 1900 concerning religious tolerance at the Maronite Society of New York would establish his bold anti-clerical stance. He would later publish these ideas in a 1903 book entitled *The Triple Alliance in the Animal Kingdom* (*al-Muḥālafa al-Thulāthiyya fī al-Mamlaka al-Ḥayawāniyya*). The publication of this book, his second, led to his excommunication from the Maronite Church the same year. The loss of support from one of the main pillars of the Syrian Christian community in New York, the Maronite Church, did not deter Rihani from continuing forth in his bold and controversial path. In the same year in which he published this anti-clerical work in Arabic he would publish an English translation of al-Ma°arrī's poetry collection *al-Rubā°iyyāt*, which he translated as *Quatrains*. Hence Rihani expanded his audience beyond the community of Syrian émigrés residing primarily in lower Manhattan, by translating the East to the West, both literally and figuratively. In fact, al-Ma°arrī's poetry represented a source of tremendous pride for Rihani, as this poetry confirmed the

presence of a famous Arab poet, both a rationalist and skeptic, whose life and work far preceded the Enlightenment thinkers in Europe, whose ideas were cut from a similar cloth. As literary historian Gregory Orfalea writes, many of the *Mahjar* writers, and specifically Rihani, were very conscious of their status as bridging the East and West.⁵³

Rihani's commitment to his homeland and his anti-Ottoman stance were the motivations behind his second return to Lebanon in 1905. Rihani would stay in Lebanon for a stretch of five years, a time period he spent devoted to working on behalf of Greater Syria's liberation from Ottoman rule. In addition to continuing to write and lecture, Rihani traveled to Egypt multiple times and developed strong relationships with reformers and intellectuals there, many of whom were Syrian expatriates themselves. In 1905 he published the Arabic language's first free-verse poem in the newspaper *al-Hilāl*, inspiring nothing short of a revolution in Arabic literary circles.⁵⁴ This poetic revolution would continue to percolate with the rising fame of his compatriot Kahlil Gibran. Most significant for this dissertation is the fact that it was after one of Rihani's visits to Egypt in 1907 that he began writing *The Book of Khalid*, which would be published in New York City in 1911. *The Book of Khalid*, not unlike Rihani's innovative poetry, broke a number of literary barriers. Not only was it the first novel written in English by an Arab, hence celebrated as the first example of Arab-American literature⁵⁵, but it was also innovative considering Rihani's national background, in that the novel revolves around

⁵³ Orfalea, Gregory. *U.S.-Arab Relations: The Literary Dimension* (Washington, DC: National Council on U.S.-Arab Relations, 1984): p. 15-16.

⁵⁴ As S. Moreh explains, Rihani was consciously imitating Walt Whitman's poetic style in his production of free verse poetry in Arabic, called *shi'r manthūr*. S. Moreh, *Modern Arabic Poetry 1800-1970; The Development of its Forms and Themes Under the Influence of Western Literature* (Leiden: Brill, 1976): p. 159.

⁵⁵ The centennial celebration of *The Book of Khalid* was held in New York City in 2011, with a symposium dedicated to the Rihani's legacy and his novel. Information about this event can be found at: projectkhalid.org

Syrian characters and their communal and national concerns, attaching it directly to the Arabic tradition that Rihani knew so well.

Rihani would continue to publish in both Arabic and English throughout the rest of his life, his combined oeuvre in the two languages numbering fifty volumes. His publications would reflect his varied interests, as he would vacillate between writing poetry, fictional prose, and political travel writing. He was a man of firsts in a variety of fields of publishing: *The Book of Khalid* being considered the first Arab-American novel, his free verse poetry was the first of its kind in Arabic, and his historical and anthropological work on the Arabian peninsula effectively introduced the English speaking world to this part of the globe. He became a well-respected intellectual in his day, as his essays were published in major newspapers in New York, London, Cairo and Beirut.

The Book of Khalid (1911)

The *Book of Khalid* opens in the Khedival Library in Cairo, where the story's narrator has just discovered a suspiciously modern looking manuscript amongst ancient copies of the Quran and other illuminated manuscripts filling the dusty archive. The dedication on this modern manuscript reveals it to be an autobiographical writing by one Khalid. Upon inspection, this curious text reveals few details concerning its author's life, but predominantly contains his philosophical ramblings. The narrator's interest is piqued by this strange find, and he gets a tip that he will be able to find out more about this Khalid at a nearby hashish den, which is full of shady characters all professing their loyalty to this mysterious new age Prophet, this very same Khalid who authored the

strange manuscript. Through the cryptic language and dense smoke of the hashish den the narrator learns of the presence of Khalid's closest confidant, his countryman Shakib, who is in Cairo. Shakib, much to the narrator's delight, has just recently completed his own biography of this Khalid, entitled *Histoire Intime*, which contains Shakib's straightforward account of his adventures with Khalid, devoid of the ideological and philosophical ramblings that fill the pages of Khalid's manuscript.

It is only after detailing exactly how the narrator was able to acquire all of these textual sources that the actual tale of Khalid's life begins. Khalid's story is therefore mediated by this narrator at all times, as the narration blends three crucial elements: quotations from Khalid's manuscript, Shakib's *Histoire Intime*, and the narrator's own commentary in collating these events. The novel's narrator is therefore responsible for weaving these three modes of narration together, favoring his own assertive narration so that he can advance his judgments of Khalid and Shakib. Having set up this narratological structure, the narrator then shifts his focus to narrate the emigration of Khalid and Shakib to America.

Khalid's story begins in his home in Baalbek, currently under Ottoman rule, where he and his close friend Shakib are on the cusp of setting sail for America. This decision to venture westwards is a combination of fulfilling their teenage wanderlust, as well as Khalid's desire to flee his home after being thwarted by both his uncle and father in his pursuit of his first love, his cousin Najma. With Khalid's desires rejected by his own family, he impulsively decides to sell his few possessions and follow his friend Shakib's advice to follow the western horizon to America, to the "city of the creative dollar." [*The Book of Khalid*, p. 43]

The journey to America, which includes an arduous third-class passage and a ‘ceremonial’ financial fleecing in Marseilles, has a tremendous impact on Khalid. The narrator likens this passage to the *Via Dolorosa* of the two men, which is entirely hyperbolic, but nonetheless conveys the torturous physical and psychological impact of the Atlantic journey. Khalid, in fact, undergoes a palpable transformation during the trip; after an intense dream, his mood shifts from the hard-headed, stubborn muleteer, to a pensive and sad soul, who sheds tears upon arrival in New York. His transformative dream includes a vision of glory, Eastern glory, as Khalid dreams that he is an Arab Prince, entering a Bedouin desert camp on a camel, praised by all who greet him. The dream represents the antithesis of Khalid’s journey to America, as in reality he is a humble émigré to America, aboard an uncomfortable steamship, feeling wholly unwelcomed in his new home. This dream effectively highlights the surge of ambivalence that Khalid is confronting, as an Easterner arriving in the West.

Khalid and Shakib begin their new lives peddling trinkets from the Holy Land, a literary reflection of the very real profession of many Syrian arrivals to the New World in the early 20th century, as referenced in the previous chapter. They rent a basement apartment and they work hard, only to achieve a small measure of comfort, reserving Saturday evenings for a traditional meal of *mujaddarah*,⁵⁶ and Sundays for relaxation in Manhattan’s Battery Park. Despite the minor comforts they achieve in New York, Khalid remains wholly despondent, while Shakib relishes the opportunity and promise of his adopted American home.

⁵⁶ *Mujaddarah* is a modest dish composed of lentils and rice, garnished with sautéed onions. It is a traditional meal of peasants in the Levant and Iraq. It is cited as far back as 1226 in *Kitāb al-Ṭabīkh* by al-Baghdādī.

It is a Sunday afternoon in Battery Park that precipitates a shift in Khalid's outlook. Despite completely ignoring his companion Shakib's infatuation with poetry since their days together in Baalbek, Khalid develops a sudden interest in literature. He pens a poem while relaxing in Battery Park, and this experience leads to his total commitment to self-education, as he begins to devour dictionaries in Arabic and English. From words to books, Khalid reads incessantly, becoming especially fond of philosophical essays.

Khalid's obsession with the written word leads to a neglect of his financial obligations as a peddler. Instead he spends days in a bookstore in lower Manhattan. His intellectual pursuits lead him to a moralistic rejection of peddling his pithy wares, and one day with Shakib he renounces peddling outright, burning his box of trinkets. In doing so he claims a righteousness which frees him from the guilt-filled deception of selling these false holy land trinkets, thus announcing his desire to seek a purer means of making a living. In witnessing these sudden pangs of morality, which result in Khalid burning his peddling box, Shakib becomes concerned that Khalid is seriously afflicted.

Khalid's new search for purity, honesty and a truly moral path in New York City becomes the obsession that fuels the remainder of his days in America. First he tries to find honesty in the legal profession, working as a law clerk. Unconvinced by law he then becomes a dervish of sorts, getting caught up in New York's nightlife and cavorting with the American women he calls *Huris* in New York City's Bohemia.⁵⁷ Finding the Bohemian lifestyle wholly unfulfilling, he then explores the political machine and works

⁵⁷ The dervish is traditionally a Sufi Muslim ascetic, and the term is used in *The Book of Khalid* playfully, in combining Khalid's adoption of a purported ascetic morality in abandoning peddling, while also evincing a clearly performative asceticism conjured up for his ventures in New York City's Bohemia. This textual playfulness is made clear by his use of the term *Huris*, a term referring to his lovely female companions that is a common reference point in mystical Islam as part of the spectrum of heavenly delights.

for a stint as a canvasser for New York's Tammany bosses in the Syrian district. When Khalid expresses concerns to one of the Tammany bosses about the group's fraudulent political tactics, he immediately lands in jail on trumped-up charges. His internment acts as a reprieve of sorts that gives Khalid time to reassess his western journey, concluding that it is finally time to return home. In prison the pitiful Khalid imagines himself a contemporary Ponce de Leon, searching for some elusive Fountain of Truth in America, but heartily disappointed in his inability to find its source. While disappointed in his search for truth and purpose in America, Khalid recognizes that he is forever changed from his experience, writing in his manuscript "my greatest enemy and benefactor in the whole world is this dumb-hearted mother, this America, in whose loins I have been spiritually conceived." [*The Book of Khalid*, p. 148]

The episodic nature of this exploratory phase of Khalid's American encounter, where he jaunts through the American legal system, its luxurious nightlife, and the political machine recalls foundational motifs of the *Maqāma* genre of the pre-modern Arabic literary tradition. In fact, the form and content of *The Book of Khalid* evoke affinities to the *Maqāma* genre in interesting ways. The formal affinities are best represented in two ways: on the linguistic level through highly allegorical and playful vocabulary, as well as transliterated Arabic terminology sprinkled throughout the text; and the episodic structure, where *The Book of Khalid* relates Khalid's forays, each episode a discreet narrative capable of standing on its own. The content of the adventures, on the other hand, pay homage to the most recent incarnation of the *Maqāma*, Muḥammad al-Muwayliḥī's *Ḥadīth ʿĪsā bin Hishām*, serialized in 1899 and published independently in 1907, around the same time that *The Book of Khalid* was being

conceptualized by Rihani. Al-Muwayliḥī innovated the *Maqāma* by “endowing it with a modern content,” and infusing the *Maqāma* with discussions of contemporaneous issues and societal criticism, including debates concerning the intrusion of Western values in Egypt.⁵⁸ The two characters in al-Muwayliḥī’s *Maqāma* even travel to Paris, turning their satirical gaze to the West. Rihani also blends Khalid’s episodic adventures with incisive introspection akin to al-Muwayliḥī, as Khalid’s adventures in New York focus on judging the benefits and disadvantages of different sectors of American society. This similarity to the *Maqāma* genre is simply one aspect of *The Book of Khalid* that reveals its affinity to Arabic rhetorical and generic forms in circulation. While the content of the work explores the synergy between East and West, the very form of this text blends the West, through language, into an Eastern aesthetic, through form.

In resuming the plot synopsis, Khalid’s return home to Baalbek is a bitter affair from the start. He immediately feels stifled by familialism and the clergy, both crushing the individualism and free-thinking ways that he had cultivated in America. Khalid’s confrontation with the clerical establishment springs from his rekindled desire to marry his cousin Najma. In pursuing this union he not only refuses to pay the necessary alms to gain the church’s approval for their marriage, but challenges the Maronite establishment on the issue, which results in his excommunication from the church, a devastating blow to his family’s reputation. Khalid inflicts further damage by burning the church’s excommunication letter in public, an offense for which he is imprisoned. This is Khalid’s second prison sentence of the novel, the first in New York, proving his inability to conform to societal standards in both America and Ottoman Syria.

⁵⁸ This quote comes from a discussion of Roger Allen’s scholarship on *Ḥadīth ‘Īsā Ibn Hishām* that is discussed in: Kendall, Elisabeth. *Literature, Journalism and the Avant-Garde; Intersection in Egypt*. (New York: Routledge, 2006), p. 25.

Khalid retreats to the mountains after his release from prison, effectively cutting himself off from society. His isolation is intellectually productive. He devotes his time to contemplation, culminating in his formulation of a universalist philosophy that he feels compelled to share with his fellow man, prompting his return to society from his mountain exile. Significantly, the year is 1909, the Ottoman Sultan Abdel Hamid having been recently deposed by the Young Turks, and a wave of nationalist sentiment is spreading throughout Greater Syria. In this charged atmosphere Khalid reemerges in Beirut, preaching values that fuse Asiatic prophesy and contentment with American ingenuity and ambition. Khalid's doctrines disseminate through the press, and he begins to gain a following as a modern prophet.

The culmination of Khalid's prophetic mission is revealed in a speech he delivers at the Great Umayyad Mosque in Damascus. Considering the universalist message that Khalid preaches, the site of this speech is significant, since the Umayyad Mosque was previously the Basilica of St. John the Baptist; layers of history, religion and geography are merged at this site, adumbrating Khalid's own synthesis of religious and philosophical values. Khalid is warned that his speech, which includes language on the separation of church and state, may not go over too well with the Damascene religious establishment. But, as he is wont to do, he decides to preach *his* version of the higher truth. His speech incites a riot amongst the turbaned listeners, and he only barely escapes Damascus, saved by the skin of his teeth. Khalid seeks refuge in the Egyptian desert, where the novel ends in a remote area outside Cairo. Again the text employs a simple trope, fleeing to the desert, to evoke a plethora of significations that heighten the synergy of Khalid's religious and philosophical blend. This desert flight evokes the Christian

monastic tradition present in the Egyptian desert, as well as the *raḥīl* (journey) of classic Arabic *Qaṣīda* almost exclusively set in the desert. Through both content and form Rihani's text is constantly evoking rich significations from religious, literary and philosophical traditions of both East and West.

The reader's arrival at the end of the novel effectively completes a circle back to the chronological beginning of the novel, since the novel opens in Egypt after the narrator had recently discovered Khalid's manuscript in the Khedival archives. Arriving back in the present day, Khalid has gone missing again in the Egyptian desert, all that remains being this story before us.

The Book of Khalid as a Multicultural Text

Much of the critical response to *The Book of Khalid* has fallen into two camps: an exploration of the generic and ideological influences on this book; and an evaluation of the book as the first attestation of Arab American fiction.⁵⁹ The latter camp has garnered serious interest of late, since 2011 marked the centennial of the book's publication. While my own analysis of the *Book of Khalid* draws from aspects of this critical work, my concerns, on the whole, are markedly different from these trends. I evaluate this novel as a literary product of an Arab writer, who, on a fundamental level, is writing about the concerns of Arab characters who encounter America as new-world terrain while on a personal quest to seek truth and spirituality. My perspective on this text attempts to

⁵⁹ Those who explore the generic influences on *The Book of Khalid* include Aida Imangulieva, previously citing in fn. 52, as well as Wail Hassan's article "The Rise of Arab-American Literature: Orientalism and Cultural Translation in the Work of Ameen Rihani." *American Literary History* 20 (Spring 2008) p. 245-275. Wail Hassan's subsequent book *Immigrant Narratives* (2011) as well as Gregory Orfalea's work *U.S.-Arab Relations: The Literary Dimension* (previously citing in fn. 53) focus on the importance of this work in its American context.

look beyond, or through, the linguistic issue – the fact that it is written in English – and evaluate this novel as one of the first fictional representations of Arab characters encountering America. Not only does the cross-cultural content of the novel support a reading that transcends language, but the very English employed by Rihani asks important questions of the reader. As Wail Hassan explains:

its English is both archaic and at times nearly unintelligible to readers unfamiliar to Arabic and its cultural frame of reference because of its infusion with words, expressions, proverbs, and even rhetorical strategies characteristic of nineteenth-century Arabic literature, such as parallelism and rhymed prose, in addition to verbal humor and ironic tone characteristic of the *maqama* genre.⁶⁰

As Hassan makes clear, on a linguistic level, this is a confounding text in its employment of a language that requires knowledge of its Arab heritage. By choosing *The Book of Khalid* as a starting point for this dissertation I am emphasizing the Arab literary heritage and Arab authorship from which it was born, while also recognizing it as a bicultural text that can in fact be evaluated in comparison to other works of Arabic literature of the *Mahjar*, as well as contemporary Arabic writing on the American encounter.

The publication of *The Book of Khalid* in 1911 places it at an important point in the history of the Arab community in America. Alixa Naff, an historian of the Arab community in America, calls the period between 1880-1910 the ‘pioneer’ or ‘pack-peddling’ period in the history of the Arab émigré community.⁶¹ This period is characterized by the arrival of the first generation of émigrés, whose lifestyle was predominantly transient in their pursuit of peddling opportunities, and whose emigration

⁶⁰ Hassan, Wail. “The Rise of Arab-American Literature: Orientalism and Cultural Translation in the Work of Ameen Rihani.” *American Literary History* 20 (Spring 2008) p. 259.

⁶¹ Alixa Naff details this periodization in her article “New York; The Mother Colony” in Kathleen Benson and Philip Kayal, eds. *A Community of Many Worlds; Arab Americans in NYC*, (New York: Syracuse University Press, 2002), p. 5.

experience was full of anxiety, a reality even documented in a 1905 article in the Egyptian periodical *al-Muqtataf*.⁶² *The Book of Khalid*, conceived and published during this anxious period for Arabs living in America, acknowledges these anxieties by infusing the fiction with terrifying émigré experiences, such as Khalid and Shakib's arduous Atlantic journey, Khalid's employment failures, and his imprisonment. The interplay between documented experience of Arab émigrés and fictional sensationalism is blurred, adding a particular realism that becomes a hallmark of writing the American encounter. The text perceptively depicts collective experiences of Arab émigrés, such as the Atlantic journey, while other experiences are captured through Khalid's intense, mercurial personality. Although some of Khalid's individual experiences are far less representative of the larger Arab émigré community, they are cleverly imbedded in real sectors of New York's socio-cultural landscape, the clearest example being Khalid's work with the political campaigns of the Tammany bosses operating in the city. Khalid's tumultuous individual journey in the novel is secondary to his developmental and intellectual journey, which is even more turbulent, and is a direct result of his ideological encounter with America. In what follows I investigate the layers of meaning that America gains in *The Book of Khalid*, focusing on this uniquely Arab experience in encountering America.

One of the basic ways America gains subjective meaning in *The Book of Khalid* is through simple description. As Shakib and Khalid embark on their journey westward, America is merely a figment of their imagination, thought to be a "New World paradise," as the two young men cling to this imagined utopia to justify the degradations they

⁶² c Abd al-Karīm al-ʿAshtar, *al-Nathr al-Mahjarī* (Beirut: Dār al-Fikr al-Ḥadīth, 1964) p. 18.

experience on their Atlantic passage [*The Book of Khalid*, p. 46]. This imagined version of America in no way matches the reality they confront in New York City's harbor, which is not the sought-after gate of paradise, but instead, "the port of some subterrestrial city guarded by the demons" [*The Book of Khalid*, p. 54]. Shakib's description of their entry into New York City in his *Histoire Intime* mixes images of amazement and terror, as the massive scale of the ships, bridges and other manifestations of power and wealth are awe-inspiring, in both the positive and negative connotations of the term. While one might expect the trepidation felt upon arrival to New York to taper as Khalid and Shakib stay lengthens, the descriptions of New York City continue to inspire fear. At one point much later in the narration, just after Khalid gives up peddling, he sets afoot back to what he describes as a "seething city," a walk described as "cutting the city in half and giving one portion to the demon and the other to the devil" [*The Book of Khalid*, p. 43]. The demonic descriptions of New York City that proliferate in *The Book of Khalid* reveal how these Arab characters experience this city. Neither Shakib or Khalid are particularly religious, Khalid even dabbling in atheism for a spell, but this ghoulish imagery is a manifestation of the tremendous fear and anxiety of the Arab émigrés, as these devils and demons are incarnations of an America that is frightening in its complexity, overwhelming in its physical scale, and whose capitalism breeds amoral ghouls. In comparing the 'new world paradise' of their expectations with the world they confront, these descriptions embody a dark vision of cruelly shattered expectations; as paradise instead becomes a seething New World inhabited by demons. This type of descriptive imagery in *The Book of Khalid*, which anthropomorphizes shattered dreams, fears and

anxieties of the Arab émigré, establishes a nightmarish trope that will persist through contemporary fiction on the Arab encounter with America.

The extra-textual autobiographical element to *The Book of Khalid* offers another entry point to understanding the America encounter. Many of the events narrated in *The Book of Khalid* are fictional representations of real events that Ameen Rihani experienced, to such an extent that one Egyptian literary critic called *The Book of Khalid* the “book of Rihani’s life.”⁶³ Ameen Rihani, like his character Khalid, did leave for America at an early age, he was primarily self-educated, and he was actually excommunicated from the Maronite church for writings deemed heretical.⁶⁴ Even the more negligible details like a Khalid and Shakib’s dank basement apartment in New York City reflect Rihani’s documented experience.⁶⁵ This notion of writing fiction based on personal experience was not common practice in Arabic prose at this time. Sabry Hafez notes that narrative experience that places value on one’s lived experience as essential to developing one’s fiction did not gain traction in Arabic literature until the period around 1920, coinciding with the growth of nationalist movements.⁶⁶ The fact that *The Book of Khalid* is ahead of its time in this regard is partially a result of Rihani’s multi-cultural and multi-lingual influences, as he drew inspiration from European rationalists and American transcendentalists. The importance of the autobiographical element to fictional writing on the American encounter cannot be understated, as this trend will persist until the

⁶³ al-Nāʿūrī, ʿĪsā. *ʿAdab al-Mahjar* (Cairo: Dār al-Maʿārif bi-Miṣr, 1977) p. 146. Al-Nāʿūrī is quoting here the Egyptian literary critic Ismāʿīl Aḥmad Adham.

⁶⁴ Ramaḍān, Hādiya ʿIḥsān. *al-Fann al-Qaṣṣī fī al-Mahjar* (Cairo: al-Majlis al-ʿAʿlā lil-Thaqāfa, 2008) p. 70.

⁶⁵ One of Rihani’s biographers discusses his early New York City living conditions, from: Ṣaydaḥ, Jūrj. *ʿAdabunā wa ʿUdabāunā; al-Mahājir al-ʿAmrīkiyya* (Beirut: Maṭābiʿ al-ʿIlm lil-Malāyīn, 2nd edition, 1957) p. 221.

⁶⁶ Hafez, Sabry. *The Genesis of Arabic Narrative Discourse; A Study in the Sociology of Modern Arabic Literature* (London: Saqi Books, 1993), p. 159

present day, revealing a confessional impulse on the part of the many authors to inform their readers of the realities of life in America.

Another approach to *The Book of Khalid* is to consider America's role from the perspective of this Arab immigrant tale. It must be recognized that *The Book of Khalid* is not a classic immigrant tale, in the sense of a tale that relates the success of the immigrant, thus confirming the realization of the 'American Dream.' The protagonist Khalid does not achieve any real measure of success, in the traditional financial sense, nor does he achieve any version of this elusive 'American Dream,' opting to return home instead. The concerns of this particular immigrant story seem to be altogether different. From the moment of Khalid and Shakib's arrival in America, until their return to Lebanon, a period which consumes about half of the book's content, Khalid restlessly explores different sectors of American society. Only the first phase of Khalid's exploration of America, when he is peddling Holy Land trinkets with Shakib, is really representative of the average Syrian immigrant of the time. Khalid's forays into the legal world, then New York's Bohemian scene, or his work with the Tammany bosses can be understood as efforts to explore sectors of America society that may have been quite inaccessible to the early Arab immigrants. Khalid is left wholly unsatisfied by these various forays, resigning himself to an honest job selling oranges in order to raise funds for his return trip to Baalbek. The success Khalid does experience in each of the sectors he explores is ephemeral: he witnesses laws that are too easily stretched and broken; his sexual exploits in Bohemia are altogether vapid and no replacement for genuine love; and the excitement of politics is tarnished by deceitful manipulation and bribery. These fictionalized condemnations of the American legal structure, its artistic and sexual

freedom, and America's political machine are taking direct aim at values and ideals often considered beacons of a progressive modern society of the early 20th century. Rihani's criticisms through Khalid's New York adventures effectively challenge beliefs, championed by progressive elements within the Arab press of the late 19th and early 20th century, concerning the inscrutable ideals of America.⁶⁷ Wail Hassan describes Khalid's forays into different sectors of American society as "holding up a mirror to America, [where] the image reflected in that mirror is not always a flattering one."⁶⁸ Indeed, the legal, artistic and political branches of New York City, and by extension America, do not fare well when brought under the Arab protagonist's scrutiny. American ideals and values are not inviolable to the adventurous Khalid, but must be scrutinized and challenged. The critical lens on America we find in this novel is yet another leitmotif of the literary encounter with America that persists and develops in new ways throughout the twentieth century. The political and moralistic overtones of this type of critical writing will only become more complex as the relationship between these two areas of the world develops an antagonism over the decades.

Binaries and Anxieties of the Encounter: Synthesizing the East and West

While *The Book of Khalid* presents a protagonist willing to challenge America's values, Khalid is nonetheless indebted to America. In a letter he writes to Shakib when

⁶⁷ Farah Antun's periodical *al-Jāmi'a*, a periodical published in Egypt and also in America during his brief residence there in the early 1900s was one example of a vocal champion of progressive American values.

⁶⁸ Hassan, Wail. "The Rise of Arab-American Literature: Orientalism and Cultural Translation in the Work of Ameen Rihani" *American Literary History* 20 (Spring 2008) p. 270.

the two are preparing for their return to Lebanon, Khalid expresses these strong sentiments binding him to the same America that he criticizes:

My greatest enemy and benefactor in the whole world is this dumb-hearted mother, this America, in whose loins I have been spiritually conceived. Paradoxical, this? But is it not true? Was not Khalid, now writing to you, born in the cellar? Down there, in the very loins of New York? But alas, our spiritual mother devours, like a cat, her own children. How then can we live with her in the same house? [*The Book of Khalid*, p. 148]

This powerful confession begins to reveal the tremendous ambivalence Khalid feels towards this ‘mother America.’ The gratitude that Khalid professes to his ‘mother America,’ whom he calls his greatest benefactor, is due to the dramatic intellectual transformation he experiences on American soil. Khalid is indebted to America for instigating the self-realization he experiences, leading to the countless hours he spends reading, attending lectures, and speaking incessantly with book store owners who introduce him to a variety of intellectual pursuits. In this sense, we do witness his rebirth in America; he arrives on her shores a simple muleteer, but transforms into a modern prophet who preaches moral reformation. And it was not simply education that enabled Khalid’s rebirth, but the sheer diversity of his experiences in America as well. These experiences elucidate Khalid’s ambivalence towards this American mother, as it was only through some of the most devastating experiences doled out by ‘mother America’ that Khalid is able to learn and mature. His imprisonment, for example, is a life-altering experience, both for its horror, but also for what it taught him about the relationship between power, politics and injustice. When venturing into politics, Khalid attempts to pursue ideals that he believes to be extensions of his moral rebirth in America, and he is summarily punished for demonstrating his honesty and speaking truth to power. Khalid’s growing revulsion towards America weighs heavily on his conscience, leading to his

return to Syria. But this retreat from American soil belies the massive transformation he undergoes. His is a permanent intellectual and spiritual transformation that follows him across the Atlantic.

The metaphor of this American Mother as inspirational, on the one hand, and completely unforgiving in her severity, on the other, expresses the intense ambiguity of the Arab immigrant trying to make sense of the uprootedness of the American experience. The ambiguity emerges from the fact that the contradictory traits of this American mother can be understood as an imaginative rendering or rationalization of the bewildering American encounter. Contradiction here is totally personified. To understand this perspective, we must compare this metaphorical American Mother to the other motherly figures in *The Book of Khalid*. These characters include Khalid's real mother in Greater Syria and the surrogate mother he and Shakib meet in America, Im-Hanna, who cooks them *Mujaddarah* every Saturday night. This comparison provides the text with a sharp contrast to the metaphorical American Mother. Both Khalid's mother and Im-Hanna are presented as submissive, caring, and a constant source of unconditional love for Khalid. Khalid's biggest regret, emerging late in the novel, is thinking about the shame he brought upon his mother over the excommunication debacle in Baalbek. Hence Khalid's metaphorical American Mother, in comparison to both Khalid's real and surrogate mothers, is the antithesis of these familiar Syrian mothers. This distinction is most pronounced in comparing the unconditional love of his own mother with the vision of the American Mother as a feline, who will eat her own children. In drawing this stark contrast, Rihani is able to encapsulate the anxious and ambiguous American experience through his depictions of the American Mother; this metaphorical

mother who is inspirational but at the same time loveless, vicious, and even deadly. In depicting Khalid's rebirth in America through this jarring maternal experience, Rihani strikes a deep chord, as this most fundamental of human relationships is dramatically altered and complicated in America. Examining the nuances of this perspective on the mother figure brings into relief the profound anxiety and fear of the American experience.

In addition to maternal metaphors other representations of America in *The Book of Khalid* depict oppositions to the East, or the Orient. Understanding the construction and disassembling of the East-West binary in *The Book of Khalid* is absolutely crucial to understanding Rihani's humanist vision of which both Greater Syria and America take part. Tawfiq al-Hakim's *ʿAwdat al-Rūḥ* is frequently credited as one of the first works of modern Arabic fiction to both deal with the East-West encounter, and to enunciate the grand cultural binary of the spiritual East and the materialistic West.⁶⁹ More than twenty years earlier than Ḥakim's novel we find similar musings on the spiritual East and materialistic West prefigured in *The Book of Khalid*. Money becomes the materialistic symbol of America for Khalid and Shakib, as they refer to New York City as the city of the 'creative dollar,' and they later claim that this creative dollar is indeed America's national deity [*The Book of Khalid*, p. 134]. Within the same iconography, the Cash Register acquires divine status, as the narrator relates, "For can you not see that this Cash Register, this Box of Trade, is prominently set up on the altar of every institution, political, moral, social, and religious? Do you not meet it everywhere?" [*The Book of Khalid*, p. 151] The iconography of the East is drawn in opposition to these financial

⁶⁹ El-Enany, Rasheed. *Arab Representation of the Occident; East-West Encounters in Arabic Fiction* (New York: Routledge, 2006), p. 42.

symbols. For example, much is made of the fact that Khalid and Shakib come from the ‘land of the Prophets’, and this fact seems to justify Shakib’s belief in the burgeoning prophet inside Khalid [*The Book of Khalid*, p. 141]. The intrinsic spirituality of the East is most pronounced in Khalid’s Bohemia phase, as he begins carrying a staff and immediately shifts into a dervish, as if this is a mode that *any* Easterner can actualize.

What is interesting about the novel’s use and dramatization of this particular binary is that while it is presented as a fundamental division at times, the apparent divide is challenged at other points. For example, prior to Khalid and Shakib’s departure for America, the narrator details how Khalid’s cunning in trade provided funds for the Atlantic journey. Despite his simple origins Khalid was quite the clever trader, selling his donkey for a pack-mule, which he later sold for a camel, subsequently traded for an Arab mare, which he sold for 100 pieces of English gold [*The Book of Khalid*, p. 39]. Khalid’s capitalist cunning was evident well before his emigration to the city of the ‘creative dollar.’ The materialist and capitalist tendencies shared by Syrians and Americans is adumbrated throughout the novel, at one point leading the narrator to claim that “the ethos of the Syrians, like that of the Americans, is essentially money-seeking” [*The Book of Khalid*, p. 153]. This ethos is further explained in the following passage:

These [Phoenician] dealers in tin and amber, manufacturers of glass and purple, first gave violence to man’s activity and courage and intelligence. And this activity of the industry and will is not dead in man, not in the Americans. In their strenuous spirit it rises uppermost. After all, I must love the Americans, for they are my Phoenician ancestor incarnate. [*The Book of Khalid*, p. 161]

Establishing affinities between Phoenician ancestors and contemporary Americans through this shared ethos, as well as a spirit of trade and industry, effectively ridicules the mirage of a rigid binary separating the two cultures and peoples. Labeling Americans as

the incarnation of Khalid's Phoenician ancestors also ascribes a primacy to the East in its exercise of the capitalist ethos. By this standard, Americans are simply adopting and reviving age-old Eastern practices. Over the course of the novel, Khalid chooses to opportunistically embody either side of this spirit-material binary in such a way that the binary's artificiality is revealed. The East-West binary is evoked, complicated, and even ridiculed since identifying and belaboring elements of multi-cultural divisiveness is not Khalid's goal, but promoting multi-cultural synthesis is the objective.

The process of complicating and even ridiculing such binaristic thinking about the East and West is present in how the novel deals with the associations between the East and prophetic spirituality. One method is detailed above, in demonstrating the capitalist values of the Syrian peoples, both ancient (Phoenicians) and modern (Khalid). Another method is through the protagonist's own spiritual journey in both America and Syria. When Khalid shifts into his dervish phase in New York's Bohemia, despite his origins in the land of the prophets, he actually becomes a disciple to 'The Medium,' a middle-aged American woman who guides Khalid's spiritual development, referring to him as her child. Khalid's subservience to this American spiritual guide inverts assumed spiritual hierarchies between the East and West. It also inverts traditional gendered understandings of religious hierarchies, through this female prophetic master. The powerful American feminine figures in *The Book of Khalid*, whether imagined, as was the 'American Mother' previously discussed, or an actual character, like 'The Medium,' enact strong Western femininities that seriously complicate patriarchal binaries as well as normative gender roles in the clerical order.

The spirituality of the East is challenged at a different point in the text through Khalid's confrontation with the Maronite Church after he returns to the Lebanese mountains from America. Khalid is stunned by the church's insistence of a hefty alms payment to grant permission for his marriage to his cousin Najma. His contempt for the church is directed at what he believes to be their complete financial monopoly on souls, couching his descriptions of the church in demeaning *materialistic* language [*The Book of Khalid*, p. 190]. Khalid's escape to the forest after this debacle with the church initiates another transition in the text that plays with spiritual boundaries, as his spiritual retreat is likened to that of American Transcendentalists like Emerson and Thoreau. The notion of delving deeper into spirituality through the teachings of American spiritual guides is yet another challenge to the religious establishment in the East as the ultimate source of some spiritual essence. *The Book of Khalid* constructs a spirit-material binary that is characteristic to the East-West divide, then challenges this facile division, offering a more humanistic and nuanced vision focused on those shared strains of spirituality among different peoples and cultures separated by thousands of miles.

The Book of Khalid, as a text whose content travels among the Lebanese Mountains, New York City, and Egypt, certainly recognizes the differences between places and ideas, but both its content and form promote a synthesis of the East and West, Orient and Occident. The grand synthesis of Khalid's Damascus speech that concludes the novel includes a bewildering list of references to those theologies, philosophies, and philosophers that have influenced Khalid's life. This list includes German idealism, French Art, British rationalists, the Book of Revelation, Muhammad Abdu, al-Ghazzali, St. Augustine, the Quran, Wahhabism, and Baha'ism [*The Book of Khalid*, p. 340-342].

The references to these Arab intellectuals and movements alongside markers of western civilization is a constant feature of this book, effectively synthesizing historical figures of the East into a shared collectivity with well-known thinkers and ideas of Western Civilization. This synthesis of myriad influences is more than just the novel's final proclamation, but is literally woven throughout the text. At the beginning of the novel, when the narrator finds Khalid's manuscript in the Khedival archive, he is attracted to the curious image on its cover, which is a New York skyscraper in the shape of a pyramid. Even the inlaid weaving of the manuscript's cover is described as being "a mixture that here and there the raw silk of Syria is often spun with the cotton and wool of America" [*The Book of Khalid*, p. 17]. The wealth of examples of such a synthesis of Eastern and Western civilization, from the minutiae of the text's very materiality, to the philosophies that Khalid contemplates, is the most pervasive theme of this novel.

As the first major contribution to the Arab encounter with America, Ameen Rihani establishes a model of accommodation, understanding, and connectivity between America and the East that binds these places and their philosophies to a shared vision of humanity. Rihani's paradigm of resolution through a synthesis of East and West becomes a dominant paradigm of writing East-West encounters throughout the 20th century, featured in texts on the encounter set in the Middle East, America and Europe alike. Tawfiq al-Ḥakīm's *ʿUṣfūr min al-Sharq* (*Bird of the East*, 1938), Yaḥyā Ḥaqqī's *Qindīl Umm Hāshim* (*The Saint's Lamp*, 1944), or Suheil Idris's *al-Ḥayy al-Lātīnī* (*The Latin Quarter*, 1953) are other great examples from the European encounter that adapt this synthesis paradigm to the resolution of their narratives. *The Book of Khalid*, like many works that follow it, entertains the promise of an optimistic multi-cultural

synthesis, while confidently depicting the difficulties and anxieties inherent in this process.

°Abd al-Masīḥ Ḥaddād

The second text from this *Mahjar* period that presents a different perspective on writing America was written by °Abd al-Masīḥ Ḥaddād (1890-1963). Ḥaddād was born in Ḥimṣ, Syria, and emigrated to America in 1907, joining his older brother Nudra, who had settled in New York City a few years earlier. Ḥaddād's exposure to the world outside of Syria began before his departure to America, as he studied for a year at a Russian Eastern Orthodox secondary school in Nazareth, Palestine. While °Abd al-Masīḥ Ḥaddād did not share his brother Nudra's poetic abilities, much to his own admission,⁷⁰ he did share an intense desire to be part of the vibrant literary and journalistic life of the *Mahjar* writers in New York City. After spending five years working in commerce and studying in the evenings he decided to actualize his literary dream, and in April of 1912 he published the first issue of his bi-weekly literary journal *al-Sā'ih*, which he would continue to edit for many decades, up until 1960.

°Abd al-Masīḥ Ḥaddād gained fame in Arabic literary history mainly as chief editor of *al-Sā'ih*, which would become the mouthpiece for the influential literary society the Pen Bond (*al-Rābiṭa al-Qalamiyya*). The Pen Bond brought together a number of influential Arab literary figures residing primarily in New York City circa 1920, who signed a charter committing themselves to literary principles such as a rejuvenation of the Arabic language, promotion of ingenuity and freedom in writing, as well as the practical

⁷⁰ al-°Ashtar, °Abd al-Karīm. *al-Nathr al-Mahjarī* (Beirut: Dār al-Fikr al-Ḥadīth, 1964), p. 52.

goal of providing a literature that spoke to the Arab community in America. Nearly all the major literary names of the *Mahjar* published in *al-Sāʿih*, including Kahlil Gibran, Miʿkhāʾil Nuʿayma, and Ilyā Abū Mādī. Even Ameen Rihani was involved in an early incarnation of the Pen Bond in 1916, only later to withdraw due his return to Lebanon in 1920.⁷¹

Hikāyāt al-Mahjar (Stories in Exile, 1921)

ʿAbd al-Masīḥ Ḥaddād’s *Hikāyāt al-Mahjar (Stories in Exile)* was published in 1921, and contains thirty-one stories that had originally been written for publication in *al-Sāʿih* in the years preceding the collation of the book. This collection represents a first in Arabic, in that each of the stories is primarily set in America, and its cast of characters are taken from the growing Syrian émigré community. While the *Mahjar* writers had experimented with writing short stories, the most acclaimed being two collections by Kahlil Gibran,⁷² these stories were set in the Syrian locales, and did not engage America directly as a place, or draw from its émigré characters. Cognizant of the originality of the setting and characters to the Arabic literary scene, it was in fact Kahlil Gibran who encouraged his good friend ʿAbd al-Masīḥ Ḥaddād to continue writing these stories. After Gibran read the first story Ḥaddād published, Gibran implored, “I want to read a story like this by you in each copy of *al-Sāʿih*. You have no excuse to not carry this out, since the field you have entered is boundless, and you need to dive right into the depths

⁷¹ Popp, Richard. “al-Rabitah al-Qalamiyya.” *Journal of Arabic Literature* 32 (Nov. 2001): p. 36.

⁷² I am referring here to Gibran’s collections in Arabic entitled *al-ʿArwāḥ al-Mutamarrida (Rebellious Souls, 1908)* and *al-ʿAjniḥa al-Mutakassira (Broken Wings, 1912)* all of which can be found in his *al-Majmūʿa al-Kāmila* (Beirut: Dār al-ʿilm, 1970-75).

and bring us what you find!”⁷³ Ḥaddād answered this call, and the result was this collection of thirty-one fictional vignettes, often between five to ten pages long, imaginatively exploring the lives of Syrian émigrés to America.

Ḥikāyāt al-Mahjar was written and published at a time, as previously discussed in Chapter One, when modern forms of narrative discourse were still developing in Arabic. The term ‘modern’ here, when applied to this stage of narrative discourse, is a loaded term that evokes hierarchical notions of Western *modern* narrative discourse. When applied to the literature of the Arab world in the early 20th century it references how the literary institutions in this region continued to incorporate, adapt, and translate these Western forms into Arabic. While the literary quality of Ḥaddād’s short stories is indeed representative of this still inchoate genre⁷⁴ in both the Arab world and in the *Mahjar*, the content of these groundbreaking stories confirms the arrival of the American-based *Mahjar* community on the literary map of Arabic literature. Ḥaddād’s collection offers a panorama of the Syrian community in America at a time when this community was beginning to coalesce. The second decade of the twentieth century, from which these stories emerge, was marked by the First World War, a prolonged war which made communication between the émigrés in America and their families in Syria challenging. Cut off from their homeland, by communication and travel, émigrés dug deeper roots in America, economically and culturally as well. America’s eventual siding with the Entente at the end of World War I positioned these émigrés’ adopted country against the fractured Ottoman Empire, much to the joy of the Syrian community, most of whom

⁷³ Ḥaddād, °Abd al-Masīḥ. *Ḥikāyāt al-Mahjar* (New York: al-Maṭba‘a al-Tijāriyya al-Sūriyya al-Amrīkiyya, 1921) no page number, from the first page of *al-Muqaddima*, my translations.

⁷⁴ Hafez, Sabry. *The Genesis of Arabic Narrative Discourse* (1993), in this extensive work Hafez focuses almost exclusively on the development of the short story in Arabic, where he classifies Ḥaddād’s stories as ‘less sophisticated’ (p. 176), than some of the other fictional forms of the time.

were hoping for their homeland's complete liberation from Ottoman rule. Haddad's collection features this Arab population at a period when it is settling into the American multiethnic landscape, wrestling with the desire to maintain traditions from home, and acquiesce to the assimilationist pressures of their new American home, which was increasingly becoming a genuine home, as opposed to a temporary place of residence.

Before offering close readings of three select stories in this collection I will highlight some of the distinctive features of this entire collection. First, all of these stories are framed as true stories, or at least versions of the truth, as Ḥaddād explicitly states in his introduction: "I began studying our Syrian life in the *mahjar*, monitoring its scenes, and depicting them in the form of a short story" [*Hikayāt al-Mahjar*, p.1 introduction]. The mode of narration of these stories is predominantly realistic, utilizing third person narration where the narrator is either a witness to, hears about, or is occasionally involved in the events of the tale he is narrating. The stories tend to be heavy on plot shifts, and weak on character development. The stories themselves primarily focus on how a Syrian émigré attempts to adjust to life in America. Stories run the gamut from comedy to tragedy, and are often filled with sarcasm, born out of the gap between the expectations and realities these Syrian émigrés frequently experience in America. Most of the stories take place in New York City, and in particular in the region known as Little Syria in lower Manhattan, as well as the growing Arab presence in Brooklyn. A few stories do venture outside of New York City, creating an interesting binary between New York City as center, and everywhere else a periphery, which is simply referred to as *al-dākhiliyya*, the interior. Economic opportunity is usually announced as the primary motive behind the emigration of most characters, and peddling

or employment in factories is the common trade, in accordance with the reality of the Syrian émigré. These stories feature an unequivocal didactic element; the narrator presents a story which doubles as a lesson for the émigré reader, and a message to the reader in the Arab world. They highlight what a reader can learn from what has happened to these fictional Arab characters in America. In what follows, I explore some of the intricacies of three of these stories.

‘Abd al-Fiṭra (Slave to Instinct): The Divided Self

The story ‘*Abd al-Fiṭra* revolves around Ḥannā Murquṣ, a man who emigrates to America in his teenage years, and takes to peddling. A quick study in the English language and American commerce, Ḥannā becomes an extremely wealthy man, whose commercial interests spread from New York City to San Francisco. Despite his financial success Ḥannā Murquṣ is plagued by his desire to engage in certain cultural practices from his homeland that are considered inappropriate in America, which include devouring his meat with his hands instead of using a fork, shaving every two weeks instead of every day, and forgoing wearing a necktie. Ḥanna indulges his carnal culinary desires in Syrian restaurants, but in American restaurants these desires remain hidden, as he refuses to touch a piece of roasted chicken, letting it remain plated and untouched, lest he tear it piece by piece. As the narrator claims, “this was Ḥannā Murquṣ – he had two sides, an American exterior and a *baladī* interior” [*Hikayāt al-Mahjar*, p. 223]. *Baladī* is a charged word here, indicative of his rural, unsophisticated nature.

Having already made his fortune in America, and clearly uncomfortable there, Ḥannā becomes fixated on returning to his Syrian village. When the end of the First

World War lifts travels restrictions, Ḥannā immediately sets sail, intent on claiming his inheritance, and vowing to never return to America. The joy he experiences upon return in discarding his necktie and letting his facial hair grow is commensurate to his incredible disappointment with the lack of modernization in his homeland during his absence. He is baffled by the lack of indoor plumbing, access to hot water, or any sort of investment opportunity. Where life in America presented him with certain strictures on his self-proclaimed *baladī* character, his return to Syria comes with a loss of those comforts and opportunities to which he had grown accustomed in America. Breaking his vow, he decides to emigrate there once again, justifying his move by claiming that “America was built by God, as a land to be settled, it is the land of people, as they say” [*Hikayāt al-Mahjar*, p. 225]. Back in America, he remains a man set between two contradictory worlds, both of which lack something essential to his constitution. The story ends with Ḥannā contemplating a stanza of a poem that he reads in *al-Sāʾih* by Mikhāʾil Nuʿayma, which concludes “I wish that I never wished” [*Hikayāt al-Mahjar*, p. 226].

The starting point for an analysis of *ʿAbd al-Fiṭra* is in fact the title, which translates as ‘Slave to Instinct’, in the sense of one who is beholden to his natural constitution, or character. This meaning is quite obvious in the story, given Ḥannā’s obsessive attachment to his *baladī* customs, emphasized by the description of his ravenous eating habits within the confines of Syrian restaurants in New York. The true expression of Ḥannā’s servitude to his natural constitution, of course, is his return to Syria. But the fact that he cannot acclimate to Syrian village life and quickly returns to America appears to be a repudiation of the story’s title. Ḥannā, it seems, is not a slave to his *baladī* nature, but, if anything, more of a slave to the bourgeois comforts that he has

enjoyed in America. In fact, he is resolute in returning to America and denying his 'nature,' and therefore the very fixity of one's nature or cultural constitution is challenged in this story.

So how does this problematic reading of the story's title inform an understanding of America in this émigré story? Essentially, this story utilizes the American émigré experience to assail the notion of a static natural constitution that domineers the individual. Ḥannā's resolve in returning to America is an embrace of his own ambivalent feelings and conflicted sense of self. The material success that Ḥannā has achieved in America is the catalyst for this émigré's metamorphosis from a crass *baladī* Syrian to a successful American capitalist. His willingness to shed one presumed 'nature' for another accentuates the fluidity with which some émigrés navigate the culturally determined conventions associated with Syria and America. Despite Ḥannā's complaints about shifting between these conventions, there is a celebration of diversity, performativity, and code-switching imbedded in this tale reminiscent of Homi Bhabha's assertions against the calcification of identity. Ḥannā may be beholden to his core desires, but America has provided him, like many other émigrés, with different standards and rules, an experience that symbolizes the ability of the Syrian community to adapt and assimilate. Part of the power of this story is in Ḥannā's confrontation with his changing identity, as expressed through his negotiation of culturally conditioned components that he associates with America or Syria. It is only in recognition of the fissures and divisions taking place in his own identity that he can find his own personal modicum of happiness between East and West.

This story is one of the few in Ḥaddād's collection that features a return to the homeland. In this return, Ḥannā Murquṣ achieves the elusive dream of so many characters within these thirty-one stories; the return to the homeland after attaining wealth in America.⁷⁵ Yet achieving this dream is short-lived, given his decision to return for a second time to America, this time permanently. The frantic geographical back-and-forth shifts featured in this narrative are emblematic of the contrasting attractions of East and West. The Spirit-Matter binary between the East and West introduced in *The Book of Khalid* is reproduced in this story in a way that subtly complicates the assumed rift between East and West. While it is clear that Ḥannā Murquṣ's final decision to settle in America is justified by the economic opportunities and daily comforts that are only available to him there, hence conforming with the binary that places material success and comfort in America, his decision is also accompanied by the text's assertion that "he desired to return to America because God built America as a land to be settled, she is the land of the people" [*Hikāyāt al-Mahjar*, p. 225]. This spiritual assertion infuses Ḥannā's move with an ordained motivation, marking America as a divine place. This story presents a sublimation of economic opportunity and spiritual calling, both centered in America, offering a unique twist on the Spirit-Material binary in the literature of encounter. In lauding the spiritual, almost messianic significance, of settling America, Ḥannā Murquṣ asserts the possibility of both material and spiritual fulfillment in America. Considering the author's stated desire in his introduction to provide 'lessons' to his readers, this story can be understood as a powerful comment on the nostalgia that émigrés felt for the homeland. Ḥannā challenges the intense nostalgia of the émigré

⁷⁵ In many of the stories of *Hikāyāt al-Mahjar* the desire to return home is prominent, such as *Ta'āsat al-Bayk* (*The Misery of the Bek*), p. 145-151, and *Timthāl al-Ḥurriyya* (*The Statue of Liberty*), p. 167-172, to name just a couple of examples.

community, by depicting the potential disappointment of return, and highlighting the problematic idealization of the homeland so often imagined within the émigrés community. He also posits the potential for material and spiritual fulfillment in America. The unique message here is that America, too, can be a spiritual homeland, albeit, a spirituality closely linked to economic progress.

In considering the return to the homeland actualized in both *‘Abd al-Fiṭra* and *The Book of Khalid*, these narratives enact a ‘rite of passage.’ This concept was developed in anthropology a century ago, and later adopted by literary critics, among them Susanne Stetkevych’s application of the concept to the formal structure of the *Qaṣīda*, the tripartite classical Arabic ode, which, by convention, includes: (i) an amatory preface; (ii) departure; (iii) and a boasting of sorts.⁷⁶ The rite of passage provides an explanatory model for human transitions that are ritualistic in nature by dividing them into a tripartite structure of separation, marginalization, and (re)aggregation. Applying this model to the protagonists’ journeys in *‘Abd al-Fiṭra* and *The Book of Khalid*, Ḥannā Murqūṣ and Khalid both embark upon a *separation* from the homeland, followed by a phase of *marginalization* and disorientation in America, and finally a *reaggregation* back to the homeland. Both narratives abide by this ritualistic format, but interestingly, both also add a new and shared element, that being a second definitive separation; Ḥannā Marqāṣ returns to America to settle, and Khalid flees to the Egyptian desert. Both texts realize an impossibility of reaggregation after their American encounter, accentuating the deep impact of this encounter. This deep impact is infused with an intense ambivalence towards America that is not easily articulated, save through a shared rejection of the

⁷⁶ Susanne Stetkevych, *The Mute Immortals Speak; Pre-Islamic Poetry and the Poetics of Ritual* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1993), p. 6-8.

homeland that had inspired such intense nostalgia. These two early narratives of encounter speak to the bewilderment of this encounter, which in later texts reemerges as a more psychologically nuanced crisis of identity; these texts initiate a pattern that perpetuates.

Al-ʿAmal wal-ʿAlam (Hope and Pain): The Pains of Assimilation

Al-ʿAmal wal-ʿAlam (Hope and Pain) relates the story of a Syrian couple who decides to emigrate to America two years after the birth of their first child Ḥannā. The couple is hoping to sweep gold from the streets of America and return home to build a villa in their village. The father imagines himself purchasing his neighbors land, then relaxing and smoking his water pipe in total contentment on this vast expanse of property. They mortgage their house and set off, only to confront an American reality clearly different than their dreams, beginning with the streets that are devoid of any trace of gold, but conversely, full of mud. Taken in by an acquaintance from their village when they arrive in New York, the couple learns the basics of peddling, and resolve to begin their pursuit of wealth.

The couple has four more children in America, but they are so resolute in garnering wealth that they decide to admit their children to orphanages, lying to the orphanage each time that one parent is deceased. Without the children to burden them financially, the couple begins to save money, still transfixed on the notion of returning home wealthy. After a number of years the orphanages are informed of their deceit and all five children are sent home. This is a devastating shock to the parents and the children, as these children, having spent their early years growing up in American

orphanages, are culturally American, in language and custom. The father cannot even communicate with his children, as he only knows enough English to sell his wares, and the children do not understand a single word of Arabic. This linguistic crisis is highlighted by the fact that a local Syrian boy is brought to translate the arguments between the parents and the children. The Americanized children are ashamed of their Syrian ethnic origins, and even more ashamed of their father, who they assail with ethnic slurs in public. The mother, whose English is better than her husband, begins to reestablish her ties with the children, and garners their affection by siding with them in their arguments with the father, tearing her apart from her husband.

While the story, as the title suggests, begins with tremendous *hope*, it resolves with a remarkable amount of *pain*. The father is eventually driven from the family home, his wife staying to take care of the children. The father is seen one day in ‘an American city’ by the same countryman who took him in and taught him the basics of peddling. In an ironic twist, the father has become a street cleaner, as he tells his friend “We came to sweep the streets of gold but I lost my wife and children and began sweeping the dirt” [*Hikayāt al-Mahjar*, p. 233].

On a very basic level the events that *al-ʿAmal wal-ʿĀlam* relates dramatize the divide between expectations of America, and the American reality émigrés face upon arrival. The fact that the parents believe a folk expression about sweeping gold from the streets to be true ridicules the notion that these pithy sayings gain currency amongst the Syrians Émigrés. The story, on the one hand, is a severe warning to those in the homeland who have been fed lies about America. The real dream of these characters, to return home wealthy is never achieved. Instead they are delivered into an American

purgatory of sorts, where the father will likely spend his remaining years alone and cleaning streets, while the mother is burdened with raising five children with whom she is struggling to reconnect. Hence this story also highlights an important generational divide that factors into the Syrian community's experience in America; while the older generation simply could not adapt, the Americanized children adapt to the new American reality coming at the cost of losing their Syrian identity altogether.

The issue of names and name-calling in this story raises interesting questions. First of all, the parents in the story are not called by their first names, as is common practice throughout Ḥaddād's collection, but are named *Abū Ḥannā* and *Umm Ḥannā*, linking their identities to their first-born son, a common practice in the Arabic linguistic idiom. Referring to the parents with this nomenclature is not strange, in and of itself. What is strange is that despite this affiliative link to their first-born, they give him up to an orphanage to pursue their financial dreams. Giving up their children to orphanages is an act of total annihilation of the family unit, and a most unusual and unnatural act. The aberrant act therefore demonstrates the extreme depths to which these Syrian émigrés have fallen in order to attempt to achieve their economic dreams. These depths are also sullied by the lies they offer about a deceased parent in order to admit their children to the orphanages. In fact, they have ceded parenthood to 'mother America' and her social service system, an act which questions the very foundation of their *named* identity. On a metaphorical level, the act of casting off their children into American social services is conflated with their misguided devotion to the pursuit of what they believe to be truly American, the accumulation of wealth. This complete surrender of self, family and identity to this misguided American dream represents a scathing condemnation of the

parents distorted values, and offers a powerful warning to the Syrian émigré community, not to mention Syrians back home who contemplate emigration. This story, in transforming the false promise of the American dream into a living nightmare establishes a trope which will feature prominently in later works.

The insults cast in *al-ʿAmal wal-ʿAlam* also open this story to new perspectives internal to the Arab émigré community in America. Two particular instances of name-calling are directed towards the father in this story, both occurring after his children are returned from the orphanages. As the story relates, “The children were most embarrassed if the other children in the street found out they were Syrian, so if they saw their father do something they didn’t like they would shout ‘Syrian, Syrian!’ at him” [*Hikayāt al-Mahjar*, p. 231]. This usage of the name ‘Syrian’ cast as an insult in public not only gives a sense of the derogatory valence of this word, but reflects the fact that the children feared others knowing their ethnicity. In addition, the use of ‘Syrian’ as an insult cast by the children really underscores the intense generational dialogue over assimilation weaved into this story. That the children want nothing to do with their Syrian origins, a position justified in the text by their father’s estrangement from them, is a painful literary meditation on the intergenerational battle over assimilation.

The second episode of name-calling occurs in private, during one of the many episodes of argumentation within the family. To help garner the support of the children, the wife would insult her husband, much to the delight of the children, by calling him a *fallāḥ* / peasant. On one level, this name-calling juxtaposes the ‘civilized’ American tastes of the children with the peasant tastes of the father. In addition to this simple differentiation, the term *fallāḥ* evokes a derogatory meaning as considered against the

urban environment where the family resides, as it ridicules the father's peasant simplicity as opposed to the urban civility and assimilation of American values that his estranged children accept. The fact that this insult is voiced originally by the mother enacts the deepest affront of all, as the insult can be read through its inter-Arab signification. The mother is voicing a separation from her own peasant origins that she shares with her husband, in turn positioning herself closer to the assimilation model provided by her children, where the use of *fallāḥ* as an insult becomes symbolic of this change in perspective.

The minor episodes of name-calling provide interesting insights into divided loyalties, but belie the fact that this potent story witnesses the annihilation of an Arab family in America. There is nothing positive in this story; it is a collection of naïve dreams dismantled, children forsaken, parents separated, and pain all around. This story produces the harshest warning to potential émigrés, and in doing so takes aim at the Arab émigré community itself, and not America. The lure of false dreams of wealth is the lie about America that initiates so much suffering, and this lie is proven here to be endemic among Syrians in America and back home.

Timthāl al-Ḥurriyya (The Statue of Liberty): Gender Identifications and Assimilation

The final story of the collection that I will analyze here is called *Timthāl al-Ḥurriyya*, The Statue of Liberty, which was referenced in the introduction. This story focuses on Nakhleh Ma'şūb, who shortly after his marriage decides that he and his wife should head to America to build their future. Nakhleh has reservations about making this journey so quickly after their marriage, since his bride Admā is eighteen years old, ten

years his junior. He contemplates traveling and establishing himself in America first, and then sending for her, but his deep love for her causes him to forgo this idea, and she joins him in the journey across the Atlantic.

The couple arrives in New York City, and from there they head to the *dākhiliyya*, or interior, settling in a large town in Ohio. Nakhleh's attempt to build their future gets off to a rocky start, and it takes him a year until he finds a job that will cover their expenses. By this time he has become indebted to relatives and friends. Nakhleh's job at a factory and his efforts in selling various products in his spare time do not provide him with the funds to pay back his debts, and this plagues his conscience. One day, one of their successful relatives pays a visit, and proposes a plan for Nakhleh to climb his way out of debt, which involves him agreeing to have his young wife Admā work in peddling while he continues to work in the factory. Nakhleh's immediate response is to refuse such an idea, but his relative convinces him, telling him, "the situation is difficult for newcomers to America, especially if they are from respected families from back home, but here in America women are more successfully employed in peddling than men" [*Hikayāt al-Mahjar*, p. 170]. No sooner does Nakhleh agree to the suggestion than his wife becomes one of the most successful peddlers in the area.

Admā becomes so successful that six years later the couple and their three children move to New York City to pursue grander commercial opportunities. Throughout this transition and the process of settling in New York City Nakhleh stays home raising the children, since the financial well-being of the family rests upon his wife's success in trade. The financial and familial situation during their time in America has led to drastic changes for both Nakhleh and Admā. When they first arrived, Nakhleh

felt like a prince, and due to the age difference, his wife treated him more like a master than an equal. But the familial transition witnessing Admā take over the breadwinner role changes these dynamics completely, as her rise in status is accompanied by a more assertive attitude, as she begins giving the orders in the household. It is all too much for Nakhleh, and one day, he leaves. Admā returns home to find her young children crying, with their father nowhere in sight. She tracks him down in Battery Park, despondent and in a deep state of depression over his fate. When he laments his status, she scolds him, telling him that if he repeats such an episode, she will kick him out and hire someone to look after the children. He challenges her bold threat, to which Admā replies, “Yes, you are the man of the house, the father of our children, and my husband in your country, but here in America I am everything, the Statue of Liberty continues to raise its hand and it is the statue of a woman, and I have the right to raise my hand in my home, to command and prohibit whether it pleases you or not, choose what you would like” [*Hikayāt al-Mahjar*, p. 171]. Nakhleh turns to the Statue of Liberty, for the first time really contemplating its presence, and replies to her bold statement in a diminutive voice, “when we return to our country, I hope to return as a man, with the rights of men” [*Hikayāt al-Mahjar*, p. 172].

This story obviously shines a light on the potentially jarring shifts in gender expectations within America’s émigré Syrian community. The particular shift in roles we observe in this story is heightened by the economic and familial shifts that accompany these gender realignments. The economic reality presented in the story, in which women are more successful at peddling than men, causes an inversion of the traditional expectations of the Syrian man as the breadwinner. This inversion leads to a concomitant

inversion of familial expectations, as the husband Nakhleh undertakes the customary role of childcare reserved for mothers. The results of these changes are profound, ending in the emasculation of Nakhleh, and the tremendous feelings of empowerment his wife Admā experiences.

This literary use of the Statue of Liberty as an iconic and symbolic marker in this story is meaningful in understanding the encounter with America on a number of levels. In terms of geography, placing this final scene in Battery Park, a locale where the Statue of Liberty casts its gaze, is fitting; Manhattan's early Arab community primarily resided in this area bordering Battery Park, and this locale is present in other Arabic literary texts set in America.⁷⁷ While the geography is reflecting a lived reality, the Statue itself becomes infused with the symbolic power as a bold reflection of Admā's elevated financial and familial position. As a result the story is adumbrating the fact that the empowering gendered gaze of the Statue is perpetually cast upon this fledgling Arab community. Another level of symbolic meaning is developed through Nakhleh's awareness of the Statue, an awareness that intuits an absence of such a statue in his homeland. While Nakhleh certainly recognizes the symbolic power of the Statue in affirming and justifying his wife's new role, he inversely gains solace in reflecting on the *absence* of such a symbolic icon in their homeland. America, for the husband Nakhleh, has morphed into this powerful female statue in all of its symbolic meaning; his homeland, on the contrary, is a place *without* this massive female statue shining her light of female empowerment across the land. The corollary established is that the homeland is a place where he can return to his manhood. This story explores the anxieties inherent

⁷⁷ I am thinking here of the novel *Amrīkā* (2010) by Lebanese author Rabī° Jābir, not to mention the presence of the Statue of Liberty in Raḍwa °Ashūr's *al-Rihla*, to be analyzed in Chapter 3.

in gender differences that the Arab émigré community in America contends with, offering a scene that dramatically splits the understanding of the American encounter through this Syrian couple; Admā basks in the symbolic power of the Statue, whereas Nakhleh prays to escape its symbolic gaze.

The reversal in gender roles is not only the source of Nakhleh's anxiety, but causes a destabilization of the traditional notion that gender differences are inherently fixed and inalienable. Nakhleh is pacified by his insistence on returning home, which he hopes will entail a return to his patriarchal understanding of gender roles. Admā, for her part, is a character who points to a new promise, and she embodies a deep ambivalence, as America has presented her with opportunities allowing her to transgress gender norms from home. While her husband hopes for a return, the story ends with this scene in Battery Park under the gaze of the Statue of Liberty. Admā makes no such commitment to return to Syria, implying that this new American reality, and the empowerment that she has gained, should be their permanent reality. In reflecting again on the rigors of assimilation that is a dominant trope through many of these stories, here Ḥaddād presents a tale powerful in its symbolism, through the use of the Statue of Liberty, but even more powerful in the ever-shifting gendered realities it contemplates.

Mikhāʾil Nuʿayma

Mikhāʾil Nuʿayma (1889-1980) and his story *Saʿat al-Kūkū* (The Cuckoo Clock) are the final author and text that will be analyzed in considering the early prose representations of America. Nuʿayma was born in small mountain village of Baskintā, northeast of Beirut. The Russian Eastern Orthodox Church founded a primary school in

Baskintā in Nu^ʿayma's youth, where he became one of the first pupils, and where he excelled. He was then recruited to attend the school's affiliated secondary school in Nazareth. His time at the Nazareth school actually coincided with ^ʿAbd al-Masīḥ Ḥaddad's one-year spell at the same school. Nu^ʿayma was such a prized student that he was sent by the school on a scholarship to study in the Poltava, in the Ukraine. There he developed his life-long affinities with Russian culture and literature, an interesting cross-cultural encounter itself, well-documented within Russian scholarship.⁷⁸ This encounter with Tolstoy, Turgenev, Checkov and Dostoevsky would have a profound affect on Nu^ʿayma's future writing.

After returning to Baskintā from the Ukraine in 1911 Nu^ʿayma decided to join his brother in America, and he traveled all the way to Walla Walla, Washington. There he studied law and literature at the University of Washington, receiving degrees in both. It was during his studies that Nu^ʿayma began to take writing seriously, publishing essays of literary criticism in Nasīb ^ʿArīḍa's literary journal *al-Fanūn*, a competitor of Ḥaddād's *al-Sāʾih* in New York City. ^ʿArīḍa was impressed by Nu^ʿayma's critical pen, and urged him to move to New York to be part of the burgeoning literary scene of the *Mahjar* writers, a request that Nu^ʿayma would acquiesce to in 1919 after returning from the front in France, where he served in the US Army for a year at the end of World War I. He remained in America until 1932, leaving for his village Baskintā shortly after the death of his close friend Kahlil Gibran. In Baskintā he continued his literary pursuits.

Nu^ʿayma made an indelible mark on Arabic literature. The authors of the classic literary and historical works on the *Mahjar* period, as well as contemporary scholars,

⁷⁸ See Aida Imangulieva, *Gibran, Rihani & Naimy* (2009), p. 123. See fn. 52 for full reference.

agree that his early novels, plays, and short stories were innovative and demonstrate a maturity lacking amongst his contemporaries.⁷⁹ Nu'ayma would have a long career in the faithful service of Arabic literature, lasting till his passing at age 91, a career marked by his devotion to demonstrating his dual credos of “The Unity of Existence” (*waḥdat al-wujūd*), and “Transmigration of Souls” (*al-tanāsukh*). It is his early, and more experimental, period of writing during which he lived in America that concerns us here, especially since *Sa'at al-Kūkū* was written in 1925. In this early period, Nu'ayma and his *Pen Bond* colleagues were concerned with bringing renewed vitality to the Arabic language. He went further than most in this endeavor. His play *al-Ābā' wa al-Banūn* (*Fathers and Sons*), published in 1918, demonstrates a unique linguistic innovation, as educated characters would speak in pure standard Arabic, while the uneducated characters in the play would speak in a more colloquial register of the language, a controversial linguistic choice for the time.⁸⁰ Nu'ayma's short stories were marked by an intense nostalgia for the homeland, as well as a piercing look into the motivations of characters and their actions. Themes that he explored were often direct influences from the Russian writers whom he read and loved. Among these impulses were his explorations of the psyche of his characters, reflecting on the political and social implications of an individual's actions, and his experimentation with realist narratives.⁸¹ The realist work that Nu'ayma was producing in America was influential throughout the

⁷⁹ A variety of critics discuss the maturity of Nu'ayma's literary work in comparison to his contemporaries. See 'Isā Nā'ūrī *ʿAdab al-Maḥjar* (1977), p. 397, full reference fn. 63. Also Jūrj Ṣaydaḥ *ʿAdabunā wa ʿUdabāunā; al-Maḥājir al-ʿAmrīkiyya* (1957), p. 243, full reference fn. 65. Also 'Iḥsān 'Abbas and Muḥammad Yūsuf Nijm, *al-Shi'r al-ʿArabī fī al-Maḥjar* (Beirut: Dār Ṣādir Dār Bayrūt lil-Ṭibā'a wal-Nashr, 1957). See Aida Imangulieva, *Gibran, Rihani & Naimy* (2009), p. 123, full reference fn. 52.

⁸⁰ Jūrj Ṣaydaḥ, *ʿAdabunā wa ʿUdabāunā; al-Maḥājir al-ʿAmrīkiyya* (1957), p. 246, full reference fn. 65.

⁸¹ Hafez, Sabry. *The Genesis of Arabic Narrative Discourse* (London: Saqi Books, 1993), p. 172.

Arab world, often cited as influencing the realist movement among Egyptian authors in the early decades of the 20th century.⁸²

Sā'at al-Kūkū (Cuckoo Clock): Broken Dreams and Literary Anxieties

The short story *Sā'at al-Kūkū* first appeared in ʿAbd al-Masīḥ Ḥaddād's literary journal *al-Sā'iḥ* in 1925,⁸³ and was subsequently published in Nuʿayma's collection *Kān mā Kān*, a collection that features short stories Nuʿayma had written while in America, between 1914 and 1925. Unlike Ḥaddād, whose collection *Ḥikāyāt al-Mahjar* contains short stories exclusively focusing on the Syrian community in America, *Sā'at al-Kūkū* is the only story in Nuʿayma's collection that directly presents American settings and characters. The fact is, Nuʿayma, like most of his literary colleagues, wrote predominantly about the homeland, as their presence in America allowed them a comfortable critical distance to reflect on their country and its problems. *Sā'at al-Kūkū*, as we will see in its summary and analysis below, was an exception for Nuʿayma, and like Ḥaddād's stories, another breakthrough for Arabs writing the American encounter.

Sā'at al-Kūkū opens in a Lebanese mountain village, a familiar setting for its author. The main tale within *Sā'at al-Kūkū* is ensconced in a confusing web of frame-stories. The story features another challenge, in that characters have different names in each story. These features serve to mystify the plot surrounding the primary story, that being a villager's migration to America which unfolds within this intricate web of narration. The easiest way to navigate the plot is to follow the trail of the story's

⁸² Imangulieva, Aida. *Gibran, Rihani & Naimy* (2009), p. 37, full reference fn. 47.

⁸³ Tuʿma, Jurj. *al-Mughtaribūn al-ʿArab fī Amrīkā al-Shamāliyya* (Damascus: Maṭābiʿ Wizārat al-Thaqāfa wal-ʿIrshād al-Qawmī, 1965), p. 71.

namesake, the cuckoo bird, in its dual incarnation as a real bird and a massive clock. The cuckoo is both the title, and acts as an organizing principle for the layers of narration.

It is the distinctive caw of a real cuckoo bird that initiates a recollection of emigration to America. The story's narrator had been on a hike with a fellow villager, nicknamed Abū Ma'rif, when the latter suddenly crumples to the ground in near paralysis from the sound of the cuckoo bird. The curious reason for Abū Ma'rif's devastating reaction to a bird sound becomes the main story, but first a bit more about this Abū Ma'rif character, and his multiple names. Abū Ma'rif arrived in the small village years ago, and initially went by his American name Thompson, even though he was not American. He was born in Lebanon, and spent his youth there, but left for the high seas in his youth, spending twenty years mainly living in America, hence gaining this name. Since the name 'Thompson' was foreign and meant nothing to the Arab villagers, they nicknamed him Abū Ma'rif, meaning 'father of what is known' with the term 'father' here referencing his depth of knowledge, since he seemed to have an answer to all the villagers questions. Abū Ma'rif's presence in the small village had a dramatic impact, as the village boys stopped emigrating to America in droves, convinced by Abū Ma'rif's zealous rhetoric concerning the vital importance of their land, motivating this younger generation to stay.

Returning to the caw of the cuckoo that sends Abū Ma'rif reeling in fright, we shift to his tale of emigration to America. This tale takes us back to Abū Ma'rif origins, even before this nickname was bestowed upon, and before he was known by the American name Thompson, when he was just a boy from the Lebanese mountains named Khaṭṭār. To add an element of surprise and suspense, this émigré's tale is related by Abū

Ma[°]rūf in the third person, immediately upon hearing the caw, so the reader only discovers in the story's last line, that Abū Ma[°]rūf is Khaṭṭār. In short, Thompson, Abū Ma[°]rūf and Khaṭṭār are one in the same; the first the name he took in America, the second being his nickname in the village he returned to, and the last the name he was given at birth. His birth-name, Khaṭṭār, will be used from this point forward. The story surrounding Khaṭṭār's emigration to America brings the narration to a culmination.

Khaṭṭār grew up in an idyllic Lebanese mountain village. He was a peasant who worked the land, totally content, and looked forward to his marriage to his childhood sweetheart Zumurrud. His plans go awry when a strange man arrives in the village on the eve of Khaṭṭār and Zumurrud's wedding. The trope is reminiscent of the story of Aladdin and the Magic Lamp when a sorcerer from the Maghreb suddenly appears. Having recently returned from America this strange man brings back with him a cuckoo clock. On the day of their wedding, Zumurrud disappears, fleeing with the visitor, bound for America. Khaṭṭār falls into a deep depression followed by a total fixation on obtaining this cuckoo clock, the material symbol of his loss. To accomplish this goal he chooses to set sail for America to gain enough wealth to secure its purchase.

In New York Khaṭṭār must learn the ways of the dollar, and in the moments of despair and loneliness, he remembers his goal, the cuckoo clock. He does become very wealthy, and purchases a cuckoo clock, but his material gain only leads to more expensive tastes. These tastes are encouraged by his marriage to Alice, an American of Syrian origins. Khaṭṭār is keenly aware that achieving his stated goal in New York has not led to the satisfaction that he imagined, as he faces the realization that he "has not

subjugated the cuckoo clock, but it has subjugated him” [*Sa‘at al-Kūkū*, p. 39].⁸⁴

Khaṭṭār’s tragic story comes to a climax when he and his first love Zumurrud cross paths, this time at a restaurant in New York where Zumurrud is working when Khaṭṭār is dining with his wife Alice and her American friend. A chaotic scene ensues, as Alice is embarrassed by the scandal, as she is horrified by the fact that a simple restaurant employee catches her husband’s attention. They all end up back in the entryway to Khaṭṭār and Alice’s home, where the cuckoo clock symbolically looms large. Khaṭṭār’s trusted and motherly domestic Sa‘dā descends upon hearing all the shouting. Alice shoves Zumurrud, and Zumurrud in turn falls into Sa‘dā, whose fall is fatal. The cuckoo clock sounds midnight as the story comes to a close, and the symbol of the old country, Sa‘dā, is dead. The narration of the multiple stories intertwine with this last scene, as Abū Ma‘rūf / Thompson reveals that he is Khaṭṭār, explaining how the caw of the cuckoo bird in the Lebanese mountains caused the devastating memory of the clock. As readers, we understand the justifications for Abū Ma‘rūf / Khaṭṭār’s vigorous reinvestment in the homeland, as he has come full circle after the dreadful nightmare he lived in America.

The dramatic climax to this story leaves the reader with our protagonist Abū Ma‘rūf / Khaṭṭār, contemplating the tragedies that befell him in America. America in this story is clearly associated with a fierce capitalism that promotes a fetishizing of material goods, like the cuckoo clock. This level of fetishizing an object completely alienates characters from both the land and humanity. In browbeating the reader to this message, the story is a highly didactic treatise arguing against emigration to America. America has no redeeming qualities in Nu‘ayma’s story, as emphasized by Khaṭṭār’s psychic visions

⁸⁴ Nu‘ayma, Mīkhā‘īl. *Kān mā Kān* (Beirut: Dār Ṣādir Dār Bayrūt lil-Ṭibā‘a wal-Nashr, 1966), p. 29.

of New York City. In these visions, which come to him during his pangs of conscience over his sense of alienation abroad, New York City is depicted as a massive, satanic tower that is being transported by a boat, and descending towards a bottomless, dark pit. The tower itself is full of thousands of machines manned by people, included many of Khaṭṭār's countrymen, who are feverishly competing to cling to them, but totally unaware of the boat's hell-bound destination, whereby they ride into the abyss [*Sā'at al-Kūkū*, p. 37]. The story's materialistic cuckoo fetishization and this nightmare image of a dystopian industrial future not only evinces a harrowing dramatization of anti-materialism and anti-industrialism that was also present in *The Book of Khalid*, but these themes demonstrate these Arab writers' strong connection with experimental trends in American fiction at the time, most notably Jack London's *The Iron Heel* (1908), considered the earliest modern dystopian novel in which London envisions a heartless hyper-industrialized society fixated on the machine. While the machines, towers and steamboats that populate Nu'ayma's vision in *Sā'at al-Kūkū* could be read as symbols of progress and industrialization in other contexts, here they reinforce the profound alienation pervading the Arab émigré's dream turned nightmare. The intense depictions also revisit the Spirit-Material binary previously discussed by completely focusing on the material products of industrialization and the soulless consumerism they inspire. These horrifying images graphically illustrate one of *Sā'at al-Kūkū*'s main points; America lacks a soul, and is instead a conglomeration of machines sailing towards an infernal fire. The only evocations of soul and spirit in this story are exclusive to the Syrian homeland.

The horrifying images that form this dream sequence find an interesting parallel through the story's depictions of women and the female body, especially when

considering the allegorical implications of these representations. Zumurrud is the first woman enchanted by the West, and her transformation in America is the most severe. Descriptions of her beauty and purity are exclusive to her presence in the homeland, and are sullied in America. In the final scene of *Sāʿat al-Kūkū*, shortly after Khaṭṭār’s chance meeting with Zumurrud, she is described in the following manner, “a frightened woman, feeble in mind and body, displaced and expelled, poor and vile. She had once been a blossoming rose in her land, since this seemed a better and richer land, but in this new land she had no color or fragrance, she was now a thorned reed with wilted leaves” [*Sāʿat al-Kūkū*, p. 36]. The reflections on her enervated body, and the use of the flower metaphor to depict her metamorphosis are both poignant and revealing. In reading the female body as an allegory for the nation, Zumurrud, once a pinnacle of *natural* beauty, or Syria, is now a desiccated, gaunt shadow of herself, resultant of her presence in America. This perspective emphasizes just how migration to America is a flight from the natural, rooted connectivity humans must maintain with their origins, both in a geographic and spiritual sense. Khaṭṭār’s wife Alice, born in America, but of Syrian origins, can be read as additional evidence of the horrors that uprootedness and alienation can cause. Her description is simply as a corpse decorated with rings, bracelets, earrings, and the like, as Khaṭṭār refers to her as “life convinced of death” [*Sāʿat al-Kūkū*, p. 31]. Alice is a vile character with no redeeming qualities; she has lost any sense of connectivity to Syria, and she indulges fully in soulless American materialism. Even worse than the wilted rose that Zumurrud has become, Alice’s body is a corpse, a distinctly materialistic American corpse at that.

The only redemptive female character in the story is Khaṭṭār's domestic servant Sa'adā. As Khaṭṭār became more introspective about his life in America and began contemplating a return to the homeland, he would seek solace in the company of his motherly maid, Sa'adā. Sa'adā amazingly was not corrupted by her move to America, but maintained a kindness and simplicity of heart that Khaṭṭār immediately recognized as relics of the homeland so many émigrés had lost. Of course, Sa'adā's fate is the harshest, killed when Alice pushes Zumurrud into her. The death of Sa'adā only confirms the fact that America is certainly not suited for the pure of heart, as every character becomes connected to the metaphoric hell-bound machine in some way. Sa'adā's collapse and death, read allegorically, is the death of the nation, a death blurring the lines between intentionality and accident. As the narration relates of Khaṭṭār's reaction, "Sa'adā, in his eyes, represented Old Syria, she was the daughter of simplicity and instinct, and pulsing warmth from deep within his heart – now she is cast on the floor, unmoving" [*Sa'at al-Kūkū*, p. 36]. America, in one way or another, is a destructive force, especially towards the female characters in *Sā'at al-Kūkū*.

Nu'ayma's story is, by far, the most scathing representation of America in Arabic literature of this early *Mahjar* period. The images constructed in this story, especially in the vast chasm imagined between the materialistic West as exile and the wholesome East as homeland, reflect the absolute depths of the émigré experience. The full horror of the trauma of separation and uprootedness is displayed here.

A striking aspect of this particular story is that both its content and its literary quality are aberrations in comparison to Nu'ayma's other works of the time period. As previously mentioned, this is Nu'ayma's only work that directly deals with the East-West

encounter, with a minor exception being the opening of his novel *Mudhakkirāt al-ʿArqash*.⁸⁵ Not only is the content a divergence from the normal prose that is filled with criticism of local traditions in Lebanese settings, but the story is different in other ways. For example, in Aida Imangulieva’s book that discusses Nuʿayma’s oeuvre, there is a section concerning his short stories where she discusses every story in the *Kān mā Kān* collection, except the story *Sāʿat al-Kūkū*. Shedding a bit of light on this quandary, in a discussion of *Kān mā Kān*, Sabry Hafez makes the following remark about *Sāʿat al-Kūkū*, “The story, nevertheless, is chronologically the last of the six stories in the collection, yet it is one of the least mature pieces, despite its important theme, or probably because of it.”⁸⁶ We can therefore assume that Imangulieva decided not to discuss the story, just as Hafez gives it a half paragraph in his discussion of *Kān mā Kān* because of its lack of maturity and aberrational status. While I agree with Hafez about the inferior literary quality of this story in comparison to others in the collection, the question I want pose is, why is *this* story of inferior quality, and why would its ‘important theme’ be the cause of this inferiority, as Hafez suggests.

One way to answer this question is to try to understand some peculiar aspects of the form of this story. As previously mentioned, the plot is obfuscated by the multi-tiered stories, not to mention the device of characters with multiple names. This multilayered tale is more representative of the embedded story common to *The Arabian Nights* than other short stories Nuʿayma produced. *Sāʿat al-Kūkū*, structurally speaking, shares more affinities with the story of ʿAlāʾ al-Dīn, where the strange uncle from the *Maghreb* suddenly appears and changes other characters lives, than it does with Nuʿayma’s other

⁸⁵ Nuʿayma’s novel *Mudhakkirāt al-ʿArqash* opens its narration in a Lebanese café in New York City, but the story then completely shifts to the main character’s memories of growing up in Lebanon.

⁸⁶ Hafez, *The Genesis of Arabic Narrative Discourse* (1993), p.174, for full reference see fn. 66.

fiction, which is known for its experimentation with realist prose emphasizing social and religious criticism. Another peculiar aspect of *Sāʿat al-Kūkū* is how it hides important information from the reader, attempting to illicit a surprise, such as hiding Zumurrud's identity until the very end of the narration, and hiding the fact that Abu Maʿrūf is actually Khaṭṭār until the last line of the story itself. This technique is not commonly employed by Nuʿayma and hints at oral storytelling techniques attempting to enact surprise and suspense. These technique issues are certainly aspects of the immaturity that Hafez is referencing in regard to the crowded structure and contrived coincidences that fill the story.⁸⁷

While aspects of narrative technique can help explain Hafez's comment about the immaturity of the story, I posit that this story's confusion is a reflection of the primary theme itself. Nuʿayma, unlike Rihani in *The Book of Khalid*, was clearly uninterested in conflating America and his homeland by means of a grand synthesis of East and West. Subsequently, Nuʿayma couldn't quite wrap his pen around the two poles. Known for his precise treatment of particular societal issues, in *Sāʿat al-Kūkū* he attempts to pin down his subject matter through this cuckoo clock, but the parameters of the debate splinter off in undeveloped shards, featuring simplistic characters and a general sense of confusion. Belaboring this point, and focusing on the confusion and anxiety amplified through the very form and content of the narrative, I read Nuʿayma as establishing a paradigm of writing the American encounter in Arabic that is ambiguous and anxiety ridden. In this sense, *Saʿat al-Kūkū* prefigures later texts in that the overwhelming experience of attempting to write America leads to formal and thematic turmoil in the text itself, as

⁸⁷ Ibid, p. 174.

later authors will also demonstrate difficulty in resolving their narrative structures. This phenomenon speaks to the fact that anxieties conveyed through the thematic content of the encounter can weigh upon, and then influence the formal structure of the narratives of encounter as well.

Summary: *The Earliest Literary Encounters with America*

The Book of Khalid, *Hikāyāt al-Mahjar*, and *Sāʿat al-Kūkū*, collectively, represent the earliest examples of how Arab authors fictionalize the American experience. The texts are all bound by certain similarities. Each text is resultant of the lived experience of each author's time spent in America. Each text either explicitly or implicitly offers lessons to its reader about émigré life in America. The texts are focused on the lives of characters that constitute the Arab émigré community and proportionally speaking, contain few American characters despite the setting. In addition, each text dives head-first into the turbid literary terrain of confronting cultural difference, nostalgia, and the various anxieties that accompany emigration to America. In sharing these qualities, the texts demonstrate how fiction offers a powerful medium in voicing and contemplating the concerns of this early émigré community at particular historical moments. This fictional voice is one that warns and teaches through depictions of events and Arab characters that border the real.

In depicting this American encounter for the first time, these texts, for all they share, actually end up revealing a diversity of unique resolutions and narrative choices. Some of the important paradigms of these tales of encounter include the synthesis of the East and West as presented in *The Book of Khalid*. *Sāʿat al-Kūkū*, on the other hand,

resolves its narrative through a total rejection of America and its materialism. Ḥaddād's many stories contain examples of both synthesis and rejection, but his most poignant tales relate the emergence of the divided Arab self, who struggles to integrate elements of her culture of origin and culture of emigration. These three paradigms are all reacting to a very particular America that emerges through the texts, whose dominant feature is economic, materialistic and industrial. Even when politics enters *The Book of Khalid*, it is infused with a crude focus on pure economic gain at the expense of humanity and morality. Featuring America in this way is clearly a critical reaction to the primary purpose behind Arab emigration in the early 20th century, that of economic betterment. America is therefore approached textually as an incarnation of the economic promise she holds, and this promise is then assessed through these literary imaginaries. The unidimensional and homogenized presence of America in these texts supports the simple fact that these texts are far less about America, than they are about evolving Arab experience taking place in reaction to America.

What is truly fascinating is that despite decades lapsed between the *Mahjar* period and last quarter of the 20th century when the subsequent texts were penned, and despite the dramatic changes in the relationship between the Arab world and America in this intervening period, nearly all of the thematic concerns discussed in this chapter become preoccupations of the later texts as well. Confrontations with gender negotiations, the contestation of a split self, deliberating a disturbing ambivalence, voicing intense self-criticism, depicting nightmarish and surrealistic images of America, fetishizing material goods, and other issues are all literary tropes that emerge within this *Mahjar* period and are recast and reconsidered later in the 20th century texts. While the relationship between

the Arab World and America would undergo dramatic shifts, notably the shift from ally status to adversary over a variety of political, economic and ideological issues, the concerns of the literature of encounter are expressed above this fray, in more universalist terms. This is largely because writing America is really about writing the self, and confronting the self, in this particular American environment. While economics may foreground this encounter in the *Mahjar* period, and ideology and politics may color the confrontation later in the 20th century, universal issues of self-identification via an encounter with American economic, cultural, and moral values instigates the evaluation of Arab subjectivity in unique ways.

Chapter 3: Post-67 American Encounters; A New Ideological and Political Consciousness

Bridging the Gap from Nu^ʿayma to Idris

In tracing the literary thread of the American encounter in Arabic literature, a significant temporal leap occurs between 1925, when Nu^ʿayma's *Sāʿat al-Kūkū* was published, and 1980, the year Yūsuf Idrīs's novella *New York 80* reached the presses. While travelogues and other autobiographical pieces set in America were penned through these years, fictive works were largely absent. One of the main reasons for the near suspension of Arabic fiction set in America between 1925 and 1980 was the rapid assimilation of early Arab immigrant community. Like many other émigré communities in America, assimilation of the second generation of these émigrés, especially on the linguistic level, was quite rapid. The assimilationist drive in America was only intensified by the tight immigration quotas established in the United States in the wake of World War I. The cessation of Arab émigrés entering America after World War I made the reality of maintaining the vitality of the Arabic language and its *Mahjar* literature in America more challenging, serving to expedite the assimilationist trend. The sons and daughters of the first generation of Arab émigrés to America began transitioning to English as their mother tongue, and the literature in English produced by these subsequent generations would become examples of the earliest Arab American writing.

While post-World War I developments in America witnessed the reduction of Arabic literary works contemplating the American experience, the East-West literary encounter thrived in the Arab world through fiction that explored the intersections and relationships between the Arabs and European characters and locales, as discussed in

Chapter One. In the decades following World War I many emerging Arab nations were engaged in struggles for independence from colonial European powers. These independence struggles and the complicated transition to postcolonial relationships animated many important works of fiction on the East-West encounter. Effectively, the East-West encounter in Arabic fiction in the middle decades of the 20th century focused on the encounter with the colonial and postcolonial other, represented mainly through British, French and Italian characters and geographies.

In attempting to bridge the approximately fifty year gap in understanding the American encounter in Arabic literature, it is important to acknowledge some of the momentous social and political transitions that occurred in the Arab world, as these transitions would inform how Arabs wrote America in the last few decades of the 20th century. In the wake of the Second World War, many Arab countries achieved independence, and achieving independence necessitated a renegotiation of power relations with the former colonizers, not to mention with the emerging global powers like the US and the USSR. The tenuous shift from direct forms of colonial control to independent nationhood inevitably witnessed the emergence of indirect forms of economic control as well as new geopolitical alignments. Former colonial powers transitioned into neocolonial entities especially in their economic interests in the Arab world. Add to these transitions the emergence of America within global political and economic structures. Although America did not have historical colonial ties to the region, she would emerge on the global scene post-World War II as the most formidable proponent of Western capitalism abroad. As newly independent Arab states engaged with new global realities, America and Western Europe represented options of alignment,

and the USSR offered a different option for young nations looking to align politically and economically against the capitalist West. It is not surprising, given the fresh memories of British, French and Italian colonialism in the region, that Arab states like Nasser's Egypt, or later the Baathists in Syria and Iraq, would develop a kinship, politically, ideologically and economically, with the socialist Soviet Union.

The period of independence and nation building in the 1950s and 60s in the Arab world was marked by the tremendous popularity of Egyptian President Gamal Abd al-Nasser and his pan-Arab rhetoric. But the momentum and confidence Nasser inspired was devastated by the events of 1967, culminating in the Israeli army's embarrassing defeat of Egyptian, Jordanian and Syrian forces in the Six-Day War. The shocking nature of this defeat in the Arab world called into question everything from the validity of Soviet political and economic alignments of many Arab states, to the efficacy of the pan-Arab identity promoted by Nasser. In sum, the old ways of thinking and acting, on the state and individual level, would be intensely questioned and tested in the years after the 1967 War.

This sweep through history is meant to highlight some of the dramatic transitions in the Arab world, constituting a shared experience that literature would probe. America was certainly not forgotten through these tumultuous decades, but the demands of nation building, fraught relationships with colonizers, and regional conflagrations became the prime concerns of Arab governments, local populations, and likewise, the literary establishment. By the time the East-West encounter returned to American shores, Arab subjectivities would confront a new American superpower that was asserting itself forcefully across the globe.

Literary Transitions in the Middle of the 20th Century

On the literary front, the middle decades of the 20th century witnessed the development of new genres and experimentation with new modes of writing in Arabic, as the tumultuous political and social changes in the Arab world in the mid-20th century revitalized the literary arena. Modern forms of Arabic literature, incipient when we left them in 1925 with Nu'ayma's *Sā'at al-Kūkū*, diversified significantly, highlighted by the ascendance of the modern Arabic novel. The maturation of literary forms in Arabic witnessed a shift away from didactic and romantic modes of expression and towards realistic modes that included new levels of psychological complexity. Roger Allen, in *The Arabic Novel*, refers to the 'Decades of Realism' in the middle of the 20th century as part and parcel of the rapid maturation of the Arabic novel, and Sabry Hafez' sweeping studies of the Arabic short story chooses the years between 1930-1970 in his book *The Quest for Identities* as the time frame for the 'mature' Arabic short story.⁸⁸ The shift of many writers in the Arab world towards a realistic mode of expression reflected the desire to engage in the immediacy of changes on the ground during the struggles for national independence and the challenges of post-independence nation formation. Literature played transformative and reflective roles in helping define national identities as it helped narrate the emergence of the nation. For example, Naguib Mahfouz' *Zuqāq al-Midāq* (*Midāq Alley*, 1947) and then his famous *Trilogy* (1956-1957) constructed portraits of characters intensely engaged with political transitions on the ground. Yusuf Idris, whose later work will be a focus of this chapter, penned piercing images in his short

⁸⁸ Allen, Roger. *The Arabic Novel; An Historical and Critical Introduction, Second Edition* (Syracuse, New York: Syracuse University Press, 1995) and Hafez, Sabry. *The Quest for Identities; The Development of the Modern Arabic Short Story* (London: Saqi Books, 2007), p. 16-17.

stories of Egyptians from all walks of life trying to negotiate the often cruel post-revolutionary realities of both village and urban life. These middle decades of the 20th century were marked by debates in literary circles concerning social commitment (*al-iltizām*), in the vein of Russian socialist realism. This notion of commitment, a hallmark of mid-20th century Arabic literature, envisioned a literature that was deeply engaged with society, keen on shining a spotlight on its more sullied realities.

A natural side affect of this literary engagement with the realities of mid-20th century Arab society was the deepening penetration into the East-West encounter as a thematic preoccupation of Modern Arabic Literature. This preoccupation reflected the deep levels of entanglement between Arab society and the West resulting from decades of colonial rule and subsequent political independence. Achieving political independence, significant as it was, did not mean that other cultural, linguistic, and ideological attachments to the West ceased. Literature accordingly explored these colonial and post-colonial sutures and entanglements between the Arab world and the West. Seminal literary works from the mid-20th century deliberated this encounter, like Tawfīq al-Ḥakīm's *ʿUṣfūr min al-Sharq* (*Bird of the East*, 1938), Yaḥyā Ḥaqqī's *Qindīl Umm Hāshim* (*The Saint's Lamp*, 1943), Suheil Idris's *al-Ḥayy al-Lātīnī* (*The Latin Quarter*, 1954), and *Mawsim al-Hijra ilā al-Shimāl* (*The Season of Migration to the North*, 1966) by al-Ṭayyib Ṣāliḥ. What is crucial to recognize is the uninterrupted importance of the East-West encounter as a concern in Arabic fiction beginning in the 19th century, running through the *Mahjar* in America, then intensely animated by colonial and postcolonial relations with Europe, and returning to American shores in the 1980s. Recent examples of Arabic literature that foreground the East-West encounter sometimes

choose to present a new take on a longstanding theme, such as *Rawāʾih Mārī Klāyr* (*The Scents of Marie Claire*, 2008) by Tunisian author Ḥabīb Sālimī, which focuses on the romantic involvement between an Arab male protagonist and a western woman who opens his world to the West. Other novels have chosen to explore entirely new avenues of the encounter, such as *Bābā Sārtr* (*Papa Sartre*, 2001) by Iraqi novelist ʿAlī Badr, which evaluates the impact of French existentialism, in the Sartrian mold, on the 60s generation of Iraqi intellectuals. Literature on the East-West encounter has taken a variety of Western and Eastern locales for its settings as well as many different nationalities constituting its characters, producing works imbued with particular cultural and political valences under the umbrella of East-West encounters. Within this continuum, a renewed interest in writing the American encounter emerges in the 1980s, and can be understood from two perspectives: as a renewal of a literary dialogue with America originally penned by Rihani, Ḥaddād and Nuʿayma; and as a continued dialogue within the tradition of writing the colonial and postcolonial European encounter that proliferated in the Arab world during the inter-war period and beyond. I will therefore highlight some of the continuities and ruptures that recent texts on the American encounter demonstrate with the early *Mahjar* experience, as well as the European encounter.

As far as this American encounter is concerned, the gap between *Sāʿat al-Kūkū* (1925) and *New York 80* (1980) is the result of a dearth of literary texts, fiction specifically, published in Arabic between World War I and 1980 that are set in America. A handful of autobiographical travelogues were penned during this period, as documented in Kamal Abdel-Malek’s edited anthology *America in an Arab Mirror*

(2000), which includes selected translations from eight autobiographical travelogues written between 1925-1980 that narrate visits or extended stays in America. The most well known amongst these is Sayyid Qutb's *Amrīkā allatī Ra'aytu* (*America that I Saw*) in the collection *Amrīkā min al-Dākhil* (*America from the Inside*, 1951). This collection of scenes from Qutb's studies and travels in America are filled with polemics, and can hardly be considered a work of literature. Qutb's work will not be analyzed here, but the polemics and stereotypes that populate his writings on America are indicative of the meaningful shift in how America was viewed from the Arab world in the post-World War II era. As a result of America's growing economic influence across the globe, not to mention her military presence in the world in the second half of the 20th century, public sentiment in the Arab world was turning against America, with Qutb's writings representing an extreme example of this turning tide. In shifting to examples of literature of the American encounter as it resumes in the 1970's and 80s, this tumultuous historical and literary context will inform my analysis of Yūsuf Idrīs's *New York 80* and Raḍwa 'Ashūr's *al-Rihla*.

Yūsuf Idrīs

Yusuf Idris (1927-1991) is a towering figure in modern Arabic literature, especially regarding any discussion of the modern Arabic short story. Since the text that I will be analyzing here, *New York 80*, is one of his late works of fiction, it is useful to outline, albeit briefly, the highlights of Idris's life and work, which will help situate this novella within his oeuvre and also within the tumultuous period during which he wrote. In so many ways Yūsuf Idris' life and work, as a bold voice of Egyptian literature,

symbolize important stages and transitions in the intellectual atmosphere in Egyptian society since the Free Officers Revolt of 1952. The beginning of his literary career, not surprisingly, coincides with this Revolution, as he published his first short stories in 1953 while still a medical student. These stories, published in the literary magazine *Rūz al-Yūsuf* and later collected in book form as *Arkhaṣ Layālī* (*The Cheapest Nights*, 1954), were daring vignettes penned in the mode of social realism; a mode that Idris helped develop and establish in Arabic fiction. The social realist mode of writing, for Idris, relied on vivid portrayals of Egypt's poor classes, rural and urban alike, often reflecting social justice as a dominant theme. Idris would continue to pen stories and plays in this mode into the 1960s, presenting unforgettable scenes of Arabic literature, like the Judge's hunt for his stolen watch in *Qā' al-Madīna* (*The City Dregs*, 1957), which transports the reader from the judge's luxurious Cairene apartment gradually descending into poorer urban landscapes, finally arriving in the bowels of the city's most decrepit, poverty-stricken areas. The tension built in this literal and figurative descent into the depths (*al-qā' qā'*) is palpable. Class, poverty, and social pressures are some of the crucial topics that characterize his early writing.

Idris not only explored locales and topics largely undocumented or only treated in passing by other authors, but his writing style was both linguistically and thematically edgy. His prose has been described as clear and “uncomplicated,”⁸⁹ not to mention the fact that his prose frequently featured dialect, or registers of modern standard Arabic that resonated loudly with colloquial usage, much to the chagrin of traditionalist elements within the Arab literary establishment. Idris's thematic focus on the plight of the poor,

⁸⁹ Allen, Roger. “Yusuf Idris's Short Stories: Themes and Techniques” in *Critical Perspectives on Yusuf Idris* (Washington, DC: Three Continents Press, 1994), p. 15-16.

his rejection of a flowery prose style, and his conscious inclusion of dialect in his work are all minor revolutions in the state of modern Arabic fiction that Idris enacted. In a sense, Idris's early work and aesthetic choices demonstrate a literary reflexivity with the revolutionary political changes occurring in the country in the 1950s. In addition to this vital reflexivity, one of Idris's Egyptian biographers has aptly described these innovative features of his work as achieving an 'Egyptianess' (*miṣriyya*) within the short story genre, as both his choice of theme and language register draw the work closer to the broader segments of the Egyptian population.⁹⁰

The social realist mode of writing that permeates Idris's early fiction can be regarded an aesthetic choice as well as an offshoot of his intense commitment (*iltizām*) to producing literature that played an active role in revolutionary society. Idris was well known for his leftist views and an ardent supporter of Nasser's socialist policies in the early days of revolution. Well-read in the precepts of Marxism, Idris aligned himself with the literary camp of committed writers who viewed literature as the essential aesthetic arm of the larger revolution. Of course the heady years of Nasser's Revolution in the 50's were not sustained, and growing frustrations emerged in various circles in the 1960s, especially in reaction to the Nasser government's harsh reaction to criticism. These frustrations peaked in the 60s with the imprisonment of many Islamists and secular intellectuals, including Idris's own internment. It is not surprising, therefore, to find Idris's fiction of the 60s and 70s shifting away from social realism and towards symbolism and the surreal; modes that were effective in evading state censors, and helpful in documenting the dark years of the 60s through a concentration on the fantastic,

⁹⁰ Abū 'Awf, °Abd al-Raḥmān. *Yūsuf Idrīs; wa-°Ālamuhu fī al-Qiṣṣa al-Qaṣīra wa al-Riwāya* (Cairo: Maktabat al-°Usra, 2001), p. 32.

irrational, and dream sequence.⁹¹ While Idris' aesthetic modes of writing shifted to deal with the new realities and restrictions, his committed stance never wavered. In addition to his imprisonments in the 60s, Idris would participate in the Algerian Revolution. He spent time on the front with Hawari Boumediene in 1960 in his capacity as a journalist imbedded with a cadre of Algerian revolutionary militants until he was seriously injured fleeing a firefight with the French military, whereupon he returned to Cairo to heal.⁹²

The oppressive years of the 60s in Egypt culminated with the June War of 1967. The immense shock of this swift defeat would reverberate deeply through the Arab world, and a long and intense period of societal self-reflection would be initiated. President Nasser's death in 1970 would officially stamp the end of an era, as his successor, President Sadat, would steer Egypt on an economic track away from Nasser's Arab-socialist policies and towards capitalism and privatization, a shift with which Idris vehemently disagreed. Idris suffered greatly during the period that included the '67 War up through Nasser's death in 1970, and critics claim that his renowned artistry suffered as well. A contemporary and biographer, °Abd al-Raḥmān Abū °Awf, claimed that after President Nasser's passing, Idris "was afflicted and his narrative and theatrical creativity ceased."⁹³ This criticism is quite harsh, but indeed, Idris' literary production was minimal in the 70s when he turned his efforts to journalism where he could express himself with an immediacy and directness. The novella *New York 80* (1980) is one of the few fictional projects Idris published at this later stage in his literary life.

⁹¹ Cohen-Mor, Dalya. *Yūsuf Idrīs; Changing Visions*. (Potomac, MD: Sheba Press, 1992) p. 44.

⁹² Kāmil, Rashād. *Dhikrayāt Yūsuf Idris*. (Cairo: al-Markaz al-Miṣrī al-°Arabī, 1991), p. 99-101.

⁹³ Abū °Awf, °Abd al-Raḥmān. *Yūsuf Idrīs; wa-°Ālamuhu fī al-Qiṣṣa al-Qaṣīra wa al-Riwāya*. (Cairo: Maktabat al-°Usra, 2001), p. 33.

The title of this novella, *New York 80*, immediately situates the reader in a place and a time, perhaps a nod to the contextual specificity of journalism that dominated Idris's career at the time of its publishing. The title boldly inscribes America into the Arabic literary experience, albeit metonymically, through its most famous city; not coincidentally the first America city with a significant Arab population. This novella also restarts the effort by Arab authors to fictionalize the encounter with America, through one of its most able and formally diverse practitioners. This fictional reengagement with America will share a variety of thematic concerns with the European encounter in Arabic literature, not to mention the *Mahjar* period texts, as well as writings in the vein of Sayyid Qutb's travelogue.

As previously mentioned, much of the writing on America in Arabic in the middle decades of the 20th century took the form of autobiographical accounts reflecting on brief visits. A number of these writings were polemical, with Sayyid Qutb's previously mentioned *Amrīkā allatī Ra'aytu* (1951) casting a particular vitriol at American values. The intensely critical perspective on America present in everything from editorial writing to travelogues like Sayyid Qutb's work can be understood as a reaction, first and foremost, to America's intervention in global affairs post-World War II. This trend would continue beyond World War II, as American support of Israel certainly topped the list of Arab complaints, but a lingering distaste for the Vietnam War, Cold War politics, not to mention America's support of authoritarian regimes within the Arab world, were part and parcel of this negative reaction. Given these realities, polemics against America gained a normative status in all sorts of written formats, as Saudi literary critic ʿAbdallah al-Ghidhāmī recalls of this period, excessive criticism of America was considered the

mark of a “cutting-edge (*ṭalīʿī*), enlightened and progressive writer who was battling oppression and Imperialism.”⁹⁴ While this polemical element understandably enters into the fiction representing America, including *New York 80* and *al-Rihla*, it is not *the* driving force animating these works, as found in Qutb. The works to be analyzed in this chapter do not exclusively engage in polemics and condemnations but offer a variety of scenes and interactions that end up opening readers’ eyes to a different, more subtle side of the Arab encounter with America. This type of nuanced writing will be the focus of my analysis, where I investigate content that is not exclusively polemic, but more inclusive and ambivalent.

Recalling Elizabeth Kassab’s assessment of the post-1967 intellectual climate in the Arab world vis-à-vis the West is instructive at this juncture. In describing the struggle of the Arab cultural self in the face of both European colonialism and American neocolonialism she writes, “this struggle was aimed at liberating lands from foreign occupation and exploitative hegemony, but also at recovering an empowering sense of self after having been defined, denigrated and defeated by others. This quest for an affirmative sense of self has proven to be arduous.”⁹⁵ While Kassab draws from intellectual history in identifying the need for empowering the Arab self in the wake of ’67, this need is likewise present in literature. In fact, important new attempts at literary exploration of the self were evident in the models of identification and expression just prior to 1967, as works like Sunallah Ibrahim’s *Tilka al-Rāʾiḥa* (*The Smell of It*, 1966) or Naguib Mahfouz’s *Mīrāmār* (*Miramar*, 1966) can attest. Post-’67 literature would dive

⁹⁴ al-Ghidhāmī, °Abdallah Muḥammad. *Rihla ʿilā al-Jumhūriyya al-Naẓariyya; Muqārabāt li-Qirāʾat Wajh Amrikā al-Thaqāfi*. (Aleppo: Markaz al-ʾInmāʾ al-Ḥaḍārī, 1998), p. 41.

⁹⁵ Kassab, Elizabeth Suzanne. *Contemporary Arab Thought; Cultural Critique in Comparative Perspective* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010), p. 7.

deeper into a crisis mode; the creative arts allowing for expressions of self and constructions of subjectivities that speak to alternative models of empowerment, cooperation, resistance and synthesis between the self and the other. This other could take many forms, sometimes through an internal other within society, or a reconciliation of one's past and present self, but frequently this was an external, foreign other, who was becoming more present in everyday life. The literature of encounter, including the American encounter, would be absolutely crucial in staging this process of self-empowerment and self-critique, since, after all, 1967 demonstrated how this phase of questioning and crisis necessitated a reckoning between self and the external other.

Having situated *New York 80* within the broader contours of Idris's life and work, along with the intellectual and cultural climate that was fixated on both questioning and affirming notions of self following 1967, we turn to *New York 80*.

New York 80

New York 80 (1980) is a seventy-page novella set in New York City that features an intense ideological debate between the novella's Egyptian male protagonist and a female American prostitute. The novella's plot is quite thin as these seventy pages, first and foremost, present the ebbs and flows of an explosive interaction between these two characters, the setting shifting only once between a restaurant bar and the protagonist's hotel room. The minimal developments regarding both plot and setting serve to focus the reader's attention almost exclusively on the content of the two characters' verbal attacks, defenses and rebuttals. The heavy focus on verbal debate in *New York 80* recalls the *munāẓara* genre of classical Arabic literature, where particular issues are exhaustively

argued. The subjects of this contemporary *munāẓara* set in New York City in 1980 are manifold, and include issues of morality, capitalism, and prostitution, amongst other topics.

The novella opens abruptly with the protagonist approaching his American female counterpart, immediately inquiring about her profession. After confirming that she is indeed a prostitute, and singling out her occupation as her defining mark, he then begins his bitter tirade voicing his distaste for ‘her kind’ (*nawʿ*), a wholly dehumanizing statement. This forced confrontation sets up the ensuing back-and-forth between the characters. The protagonist’s scathing criticisms of her moral fabric are both personal and universal, as he attacks her morality and intellect in particular, but he also attacks more broadly the American capitalist structures that enable such commodification of humans at the expense of personal relationships and romantic love. He bases his arguments on comparisons to his native Egypt, as he reflects on the sad plight of female Egyptian acquaintances he knew who were forced into prostitution due to socio-economic conditions. The protagonist contrasts these Egyptian prostitutes with this refined American prostitute, recycling an image of wealth in America by implying that this American prostitute would never face such dire, and socially coercive conditions in making her career choice. She politely allows him to develop his arguments, simply absorbing his verbal abuse. Her politeness is not a sign of weakness but patience, as following his degrading comments she unleashes a series of clever rebuttals. She counters his tirade by mocking his romantic and naïve understanding of love and her profession. This encounter is at once serious and comical, as both characters are defensive and persuasive in their positions, while playfully enjoying the ribbing and the

tenor of the debate. Neither is inclined to stop his/her line of argumentation, chiding, or other verbal gymnastics. Add to this tragicomedy the fact that both characters are highly individuated while producing arguments that willingly represent their broader culture – East and West - and its system of values. Hence, on the surface, we are presented with a tongue-in-cheek clash of civilizations as the characters position themselves in ideological opposition to one another.

A shift in *New York 80*'s setting frames the progression of the ongoing debate between the Egyptian protagonist, who we come to discover is a writer, and his American antithesis. While he viciously criticizes her, he is shaken by her criticisms of his romantic ideas on love and marriage. He flinches at first, bidding her farewell and retiring to his hotel room. While the protagonist's explicit intention for departing is to stop 'wasting his time,' the novella's narrator reveals the deeper factors at work in the protagonist decision, elucidating for the reader the acute identity crisis that this encounter has initiated in him. While the protagonist brushes off her verbal attacks publicly, we discover that his foundation and core beliefs are unsettled by their interaction. The narrator's role emerges in the novella as a crucial third voice, a role that increases throughout the novella in presenting the protagonist's crisis. The narrator conjures memories about the protagonist and generally helps the reader navigate the shifts in the protagonist's comprehension of his environment and this jarring encounter.

No sooner does the protagonist retire to his hotel room when a knock at the door reveals the presence of the American prostitute. The intensely antagonistic dynamic of the encounter begins to shift at this midway point in the novella. She is keenly aware that her harsh criticisms drove him away, and she arrives at his door carrying the proverbial

olive branch. In an effort to coax him into opening the door she reveals the fact that she is a trained psychiatrist, presenting her medical issue identification card as proof, in an obvious appeal to his intellectual side. Her appeal is successful, as he is indeed impressed by her intellectual achievements. Revealing her academic credentials acts as a double-edged sword; this revelation allows her to reengage with this Eastern writer based on an intellectual equal-footing of sorts, but the revelation also compounds his confusion regarding her choice of profession, further polarizing their values and morals. The protagonist is deeply confused by her choices, a confusion caught between the poles of intense attraction and repulsion. On the one hand, he develops an attraction to this American prostitute, triggered by a combination of her striking beauty and impressive academic background. On the other hand, he is absolutely repulsed by the notion that a woman as well-educated as she could *choose* to become a prostitute. Her very existence is totally contradictory to him. The prostitute, whose name in this section of narration is revealed to be Pamela Graham, takes time to rationally explain her choice, detailing how she had previously worked at a clinic treating men with impotency for five dollars an hour, but now she treats them for the same affliction via her new profession for over one hundred dollars an hour. While Pamela Graham justifies her decision as purely economic, the protagonist is again revolted by her disregard for the moral 'red lines' that this decision has crossed, as he understands her economic rationalization through the lens of a corrupting and corrupted western capitalism.

After an intense moment where he nearly gives in to his sexual desire for her, initiated by a mere brush of shoulders, the encounter resumes its consistency as a verbal sparring match, rife with insults. He calls her a 'traitor of creation' (*khā'inat al-khalq*)

who has lost all sense of moral rectitude, while she criticizes his traditionalism, especially his inability to accept alternative models of life and happiness. The novella comes to a close back at the hotel bar, where Pamela finally loses her composure with his constant barrage of criticism. She shouts her declarations of personal and moral ‘cleanliness’ against his charges of depravity. Her blunt honesty about her personal choices, claiming that everyone is essentially a prostitute to someone, or something, only falls on his deaf ears. For his part, the protagonist holds firmly to what he believes to be his moral upper hand, conceding only at the end, and to himself, that he wishes men in his country had the courage that Pamela demonstrates.

Clash and Crisis in New York 80

This novella is fertile ground for investigation of the American encounter in Arabic literature from a variety of perspectives. First and foremost is a consideration of the novella’s presentation of this encounter through the structure of a grand clash of ideas and civilizational values between the East and West. On one side of this ideological clash, the novella’s Egyptian protagonist is presented as bold, value-laden, and authoritative. These strong aspects of his character belie the crisis of identity that he experiences throughout the work. This identity crisis and other aspects of the protagonist’s process of identification will be investigated, especially in reference to how his character is developed in America, and against an American Other. The American Other, represented by Pamela Graham and to a lesser extent New York City, are developed and utilized in fascinating ways in the progression of the narrative, and will likewise be assessed. Of course, it is not only through this American Other that the

protagonist seeks to achieve subjective meaning, but he is defined through crucial moments in his past that are inserted at important junctures in the novella. These cultural narratives, often memories from Egypt laced into the text, are important textual moments that call for pause in considering the development of the protagonist's subjectivity. Each of these overlapping aspects of the novella mentioned above will be explored in attempting to make sense of this novella's unique contribution to the American Encounter in Arabic fiction.

Encounter as Clash: Polemics, Binaries, and Resolutions

New York 80 features an Arab man's bold encounter with America best described as confrontational. The novella, in essence, is the presentation of a hostile conversation between opposing forces, embodied here by an Arab protagonist and his American counterpart. The use of the polemic is certainly not new to writing this cross-cultural encounter, as it recalls the approach common to autobiographical travelogues like Sayyid Quṭb's *Amrīkā allatī Ra'aytu*, not to mention impulses within editorial writing mentioned previously. The fascinating change present in Yusuf Idris's fictional account is that polemics enter into a dialectical fictional world in which the Arab protagonist confronts an embodied American counterpart, who responds to these polemics with her own intense rebuttals, essentially trading barbs for barbs. America ostensibly *is* Pamela Graham in this novella.

In distilling the content of this confrontation from the exchange of insults and provocations, what emerges are ideological battles over opposing conceptions of love, economics and human progress. On each topic the two characters are presented as

holding diametrically opposed positions. On love, for example, he scolds her total devaluation of this beautiful ideal, which, he claims, “cannot be purchased through mere payment” [*New York 80*, p. 11].⁹⁶ She holds her ground by mocking what she views as his over-romanticized evaluation of love, and she explains her own thoughts on love and marriage by focusing on the emotionless fiduciary obligations grounding the institution of marriage. On economics, he rails against the unbridled freedoms prized in America’s capitalist system that influence Americans like Pamela to view their own body as a good for sale. Meanwhile she defends her logical decision to make the most money in the shortest amount of time. Their opposing visions for humanity feature his pontifications upon the value of human dignity (*karāma*) as the most precious element of humankind, while she mocks his vision as immature in that he confines all humanity to a single, hierarchical morality that can seemingly govern every individual in every local context. She prefers instead a multivalent approach to individual happiness through a celebration of personal choice.

As the characters interact through their oppositions to one another it is difficult to differentiate between values they truly hold dear, versus positions they enunciate simply to establish stark opposition to one another. What is clear is that the Eastern protagonist espouses positions identifying him with a universal morality and unified vision of humanity and progress, whose foundations are very much localized in his own particular cultural origins, such as his reverence for *karāma*. Pamela’s identifications with ideological positions opposed to the protagonist cause the protagonist’s ideological

⁹⁶ Idrīs, Yūsuf. *New York 80* (Cairo: Maktabat Miṣr, 1980), p. 11. My translations unless otherwise noted.

entrenchment, as the protagonist's response is reactionary in holding even more firmly to his notions of Eastern superiority.

The polemical back and forth between the characters foregrounds an antagonistic relationship that utilizes binaries familiar to the East-West literary encounter. The fact that the text pits a romantic Arab man against an American female who champions the virtues of capitalism intersects the *eastern male-western female* binary with the *spirit-material* binary. There are nuances in the recapitulation of these binaries in *New York 80* that initiate a shift in emphasis from previous trends. As for the gendered binary, the fact that the Arab male protagonist voices romantic and overly sentimental perspectives on love is unique to the gendered aspect of East-West encounter. While the West is feminized through Pamela's character, in keeping with the normative practice of the East-West literary encounter⁹⁷, the presence of an Arab male romantic complicates this novella in a uniquely American way. The simple fact that the protagonist champions love and the institution of marriage instead of being depicted as the lust-driven Arab man abroad, a trope common to the narratives of the European encounter as reflected in the Orientalist view of the Arab as over-sexed, helps establish the striking divide between the protagonist and Pamela in a most ironic mode of representation. The protagonist's emotional appeals to love, dignity, and marriage are a source of pride that fuels his positive sense of self, while her advocacy on behalf of personal choice, and her cold assessment of marriage as an economic institution create a severe ideological impasse between the characters. The American nuance to this encounter is one that focuses on the ideological, and by extension, geographical distance between these two embodiments of

⁹⁷ El-Enany, Rasheed. *Arab Representations of the Occident; East-West Encounters in Arabic Fiction* (New York: Routledge, 2006), p. 13.

East and West. Where the European encounter often focused on interaction and sexual union between two gendered characters, here we find the opposite, as their ideological opposition is only reinforced by the emotional and sexual distance they also maintain. The ‘distance’ produced between the two characters is reflective of the geographic distance between these two culturally determined subjectivities.

This ‘American’ nuance of the gendered binary in *New York 80* is also accompanied by a shift within the Spirit-Material divide towards an almost complete focus on the destructive aspects of American materialism. No ink is spilled praising the East as a spiritual answer to the West, but instead, the protagonist wages his defense of his origins through a moral appeal based on universal humanistic values. These humanistic values that he holds dear are projected as being under constant attack by consumer culture, *read* America, which necessarily lacks morality and values. The gendered binary and the Spirit-Material binary tightly tether both American sides of these binaries, Western Woman and the Material West, to immoral economic impulses. The ideological critique is clear, as the novella rails against an American economic system that inspires moral depravity, coercion, commodification and dehumanization.

The economic focus present in the recapitulation of these binaries, and the protagonist’s reaction to the dehumanizing potential of capitalist structures, when read against Egypt in 1980, speaks to a definite fear of hegemonic American capitalism infiltrating Egypt. After nearly a decade of President Sadat’s economic ‘opening’ (*infitāḥ*) in Egypt during the 1970s, when economic privatization was encouraged, the protagonist’s reaction to Pamela, and by extension, American capitalism, is militating against the disapproving version of American capitalism that he depicts. Hence the

novella's polemics can be understood as voicing a critique of the Egyptian *infitāḥ*'s potential endgame, understood in this novella as the total commodification of humans, not to mention the loss of dignity. Read in this light, the polemical aspects of the novella are aimed at warning readers of the excesses inherent to both capitalism and total freedom of the individual. The resuscitation of the common binaries of the East-West encounter through the polemics in *New York 80* reveal a local and global agenda tied to this particular moment in time, directly referencing America while indirectly expressing a fear of Sadat's capitalist-leaning policies. This perspective reveals just how this text reduces America to its economic system; exposing an inability to deal with America outside of broad ideological structures pulsing through this intense interaction. This reductive tendency is certainly not new, as the *Mahjar* texts evinced different gradations of this same tendency.

A central task in this narrative is the establishment of tenuous equality between these two ideologically opposed subjectivities. The fact that the protagonist begins the narration by criticizing his western counterpart is an attempt to establish his authority as an equal partner in this ideological debate against a representative of the American superpower. The protagonist refuses to back down publicly in the face of her criticism, as the verbal sparring delivers one heavy blow after another, resulting in entrenchment on both sides. The protagonist's sustained aggressiveness in attacking and defending his positions throughout the narrative is a form of 'writing back' to empire from the position of a self-identified third-world citizen [*New York 80*, p. 36]. 'Writing back' is normally associated with post-colonial literature where the former colonized subject literarily

confronts historic or continuing injustices of her former colonizer.⁹⁸ It is not much of a stretch to see this impulse at work in this novella when the reader is entering the narration through the perspective of a protagonist who identifies himself as ‘third-world,’ and is visiting the economic center of the ascending American Empire circa 1980. Even if a colonial relationship between the Arab world and America did not precede this visit, this protagonist is seeking a sense of empowerment by positioning himself against, and even morally superior to, this American Empire. This effort of ‘writing back’ to empire by insulting America’s economic and moral values is certainly part of the ideological positioning of the protagonist in the novella. Idris’s protagonist stages a rallying cry from a marginalized position, authorizing an empowered sense of self. Unlike other works on the East-West encounter that promote a synthesis of values, *New York 80’s* antagonistic polemics define ideologically opposed positionalities. The structural presentation of two subjectivities battling on equal footing attempts to raise the stature of the protagonist against his perceived superior counterpart.

Aspects of the novella’s formal structure serve to buttress this antagonistic ideological content. Three formal elements of the novella act as support for this clash: the overwhelming dominance of dialogue in the narrative; the novella’s temporal frame; and the novella’s lack of resolution. The dominance of dialogue in this novella establishes the dialectic as the *modus operandi* of the novella’s structure. The novella could easily be staged as a play, given the preponderance of dialogue. Yusuf Idris was a skilled practitioner of this literary form as well, and he certainly relied on his theatrical skill in designing this work. Emphasizing dialogue over other forms of narration sustains

⁹⁸ For a detailed exposition on this concept see *The Empire Writes Back*, Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin, editors (London: Routledge, 1989).

the clash within the work, as the reader is constantly shuttling back and forth between the hostile remarks and justifications of the two main characters.

Second, by temporal frame here, I am referring to the ‘real time’ elapsed during the progression of this work. Given the dominance of dialogue in this novella and minimal shifts in setting, the novella’s action takes place in just about the amount of time it takes to read the work. The entire work is focused on about three hours in the lives of these two characters, hence it is intensely concentrated on this charged moment. This temporal frame, restrictive as it is, enhances the antagonistic ideological content by completely entrapping the reader within the debate, adding only brief moments of pause for the narrator’s descriptions, or fleeting memories. The sheer intensity of this literary snapshot, depicting a few hours of debate in the lives of this Egyptian writer and an America prostitute, reinforces the clash structure.

Third, and perhaps the most important supporting feature of the clash depicted in *New York 80*, is the lack of resolution to close the novella. The novella begins with the protagonist decrying Pamela’s profession and her ‘kind’, and it ends with Pamela defending herself and her ‘cleanliness’ against his continuous attacks. The novella rejects the classic narratological structure of “setup – conflict – resolution,” but chooses instead to simply dwell in a state of perpetual conflict. While the protagonist’s closing remark, asking when ‘men in his country would have the courage of prostitutes,’ is an admission of respect for Pamela’s courage, it in no way achieves a narrative resolution, as the two sides remain polarized until the very end of the work. Both content and formal structure operate in unison in *New York 80* to establish and maintain oppositions, binaries, and perpetual ideological antagonism in this charged and irresolvable moment.

Encounter as Identity Crisis: The Protagonist's Crumbling Fort

A character in Iraqi writer Hasan Blasim's short story *The Story Market* (*Sūq al-Qiṣaṣ*, 2012) claims, "you get acquainted with the world from home, but you get acquainted with yourself from abroad."⁹⁹ This quotation distills pages of critical theory concerning the insights that travel writing offers in providing a better understanding of character construction and identification when abroad.¹⁰⁰ As discussed in the opening chapter, simply travelling abroad can place an individual in a state of anxiety and alienation within a new cultural domain, almost inevitably provoking this subjectivity to challenge and question ideas and values they had previously never pondered. *New York 80*, in certain respects, is a meditation on the anxieties present in the cross-cultural experience. How the protagonist 'gets acquainted with himself' in a foreign setting is a complex process that we turn to here.

The clash between the two characters discussed in the preceding pages reveals important ideological affiliations and positions the two characters hold. While this ideological content and its supportive narrative structure develop the two characters' opposing affiliations on issues like morality and economics, this dialectic build-up lacks a sense of the personal, developmental experience of the Arab protagonist abroad. But this

⁹⁹ Blāsīm, Ḥasan. *Majnūn Sāḥat al-Ḥurriyya* (Beirut: al-Mu'asassa al-ʿArabiyya lil-Dirāsāt wa al-Nashr, 2012), p. 127.

¹⁰⁰ I am referring to foundational critical texts on travel writing that explore the complex process of encounter, such as: James Redfield, "Herodotus the Tourist", *Classical Philology*, Vol. 80 No. 2 (Apr., 1985), p. 97-118; Mary Louise Pratt, "Arts of the Contact Zone," *Profession*, (1991), p. 33-40; Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, (Berkeley University of California Press, 1984); Many similar ideas can be found in the edited volume by Kristi Siegal, ed. *Issues in Travel Writing: Empire, Spectacle and Displacement* (New York: Peter Lang, 2002).

personal content is in fact present in the novella's substructure, laced in between the domineering dialogue through multiple means: the protagonist's internal monologue; the narrator's reflections on the protagonist; the presentation of memories from the protagonist's youth; and the admission of other personal information crucial to gaining a better understanding of the protagonist's encounter with America. These interstices in the main dialectical structure reveal the fascinating contours of the protagonist's severe identity crisis.

The encounter with Pamela Graham destabilizes the protagonist even during his attempt to establish himself as her authoritative and equal counterpart. The opening pages of the novella reveal both the clash topos and the topos of the protagonist's internal destabilization, where the former is developed as *the* dominant theme, while the latter is a narrative preoccupation marginalized to the intense dialogue. I believe that the crisis of the protagonist, while secondary in terms of explicit content and structure, is *the* crucial facet to understanding this novella.

The novella textually marks the first shift into the personal thoughts of the protagonist by placing the words 'internal monologue' in parenthesis before a statement he delivers in the novella's opening pages [*New York 80*, p. 6]. This excerpt of so-called 'internal monologue' reveals the protagonist's amazement over Pamela's candor in discussing her profession, which she reveals without any sense of embarrassment. Part of the protagonist's internal monologue divulges his admiration of Pamela's ability to express the truth, no matter how lurid it may be. Through this 'internal monologue' the protagonist shifts rapidly from admiration of Pamela to a reactionary defense of his own culture's 'more polite' manner of discussing prostitution. The protagonist is clearly

divided between his respect for the openness Pamela exhibits and defense of his own cultural manners. His feelings remain unresolved, and this lack of resolution is merely the first evidence of the strong ambivalence that underlies his confrontation with Pamela.

The protagonist's ideological clash with Pamela produces fascinating moments of ambivalence and character destabilizations throughout the novella. Exploring one example, his reactions to her attire and appearance, will clarify this process of confronting difference. In this initial 'internal monologue,' the protagonist also comments that Pamela's reading glasses and lack of makeup in no way represent the signifying marks of a prostitute, at least by *his* estimation. While this point is introduced as an aside, simply marking a cultural difference, it is referenced moments later in a much more significant way. In an ensuing scene, Pamela and the protagonist are trading insults, then he pauses in frustration, scans the restaurant, and the narration relates: "He turned toward the cafeteria bar. There was no way of telling whether the other women were prostitutes or not. There was no longer any difference in this crowded place. He was filled with hate for women, those present and absent, beautiful and ugly. Each of them was wearing one of their seventy masks" [*New York 80*, p. 15]. This passage revisits, in a much more profound way, the confusion that Pamela has initiated in the protagonist's psyche. The contradictions that her attire evokes in his culturally-coded preconceptions initiate a breakdown in his ability to trust his own perceptions of everyday reality in America. His knee-jerk reaction to this disorienting experience is to rage against women, conflating Pamela with her entire gender. While this rage is fueled by gendered binaries that fit nicely with the novella's clash topos, the protagonist's disorienting loss of perception reveals new depths in his developing crisis of identity.

When this crisis of identity reaches a climax, it is the novella's narrator who steps in to describe the protagonist's destabilization, as the following extract details:

Over the decades he had built himself a fort of his intellect, his personality, his intelligence and his talent. He used to feel humbled when others prostrated before his might ... This is a woman who hardly knows him, but understands him fully. Their conversation has turned into a trial in which he stands accused. Whenever he talks, words spring from a source inside him that he knows well; they arrive spontaneously and truthfully. This time too, his words in response to her candidness, her objectivity, and her brazenness – they come as usual, spontaneous and true. But the source inside him – the source of whose purity and genuineness he had always been sure – his faith in it is now beginning to falter. His words are now a mixture of truth and lies. He no longer understands. His confusion is threatening to engulf him. Let him erase this woman from existence. At least his own existence. Let this entire place be razed to the ground.¹⁰¹

This passage, situated about a third of way through the novella, fully reveals the extent of the protagonist's crisis and emphasizes the crucial substructure to the clash frame. While the novella shifts immediately back to the dialogue after this description by the narrator, the entire American encounter is thrown into relief by this passage. Both the protagonist's loss of a stable core and his perpetual effort to ridicule and embarrass Pamela must be understood as emanating from a subjectivity in flux; a subjectivity that is clinging to positions and identifications from a very unstable position.

Prior to exploring some of the contours of this identity crisis it is important to acknowledge a challenge this novella presents to its very analysis. The fact is, in the limited temporal frame of this novella, which is essentially encapsulated by a single afternoon, the protagonist is caught in the grips of this crisis. This brief encounter is one

¹⁰¹ Idrīs, Yūsuf. *New York 80* (Cairo: Maktabat Miṣr, 1980), p. 28, this quotation taken from the translation by Rasheed al-Enany, *Tales of Encounter* (Cairo: The American University in Cairo Press, 2012), p. 90.

characterized by reaction, not reflection. While many other works on the East-West encounter narrate years in a character's life in which readers can understand the character's gradual development and self-discovery in a foreign setting, *New York 80* presents a single reactionary and ideologically charged moment. As readers, we are caught in this brief and confusing moment, and understanding the protagonist's crisis necessarily lacks a sense of temporal development. That said, parsing elements of dialogue, narration, memory and historical context offer an entryway into the triggers and causes of his destabilization in America.

The encounter with America via the protagonist's clash with Pamela Graham is the primary trigger of his identity crisis. What is interesting in analyzing this encounter is exploring those aspects of Pamela Graham's character that prompt his intense crisis. Gender and identity politics are two crucial aspects in this process. The gendered dynamic in *New York 80*, as previously mentioned, builds off a classic trope in writing on the East-West encounter in which the West is feminized through a female character who often acts as an educator in relation to the Eastern man, leading him in a process of self-discovery.¹⁰² While *New York 80* features a similar dynamic, the self-discovery aspect of this trope is represented not through a compassionate interaction between the protagonist and Pamela, but his self-discovery is instead depicted through a very private and internal reaction to Pamela, fueling his identity crisis. Part of his reaction and self-discovery emerges from a clear element of gendered anxiety that her character initiates. At one point he in fact admits a degree of shame in being scared of this woman [*New York 80*, p. 40]. Her powerful femininity unsettles his identification as a strong Eastern man, as he

¹⁰² El-Enany, Rasheed. *Arab Representations of the Occident; East-West Encounters in Arabic Fiction*. (New York: Routledge, 2006) p. 13.

refers to her as his ‘antithesis.’ There is an implication here that an American male counterpart, educated and opinionated in the vein of Pamela Graham, would be a natural occurrence, but Pamela’s femininity is threatening and emasculating; hence he attacks her from a gendered perspective. It is from this threatened sense of male selfhood that we can understand his derogatory comments of hatred of her ‘kind/gender’ or his desire to ‘erase her from existence’ as quoted above. These comments demonstrate how an integral part of his identity crisis involves Pamela’s ability to unsettle patriarchal hierarchies that he had never previously questioned as part of his ‘fort of intellect and personality.’ His verbal dehumanization of Pamela is further complicated by the overwhelming attraction that she kindles in him. This attraction is depicted in misogynistic terms on multiple occasions: early in the narration he likens himself to a wolf in his desire to consume her, and later he refers to the Eastern man inside himself that she awakens, conjuring images of himself with a *Harem* of women that he controls [New York 80, p. 17 and p. 40]. These misogynistic musings are part and parcel of the protagonist’s crisis, as his destabilization sees him reaching for distorted notions of male dominance, with what seem to be Orientalist linkages in the *Harem*, clearly contradictory to the morality and humanism he identifies with and preaches throughout their debate.

The amazing ambivalence of the protagonist’s reaction to Pamela as a strong, intellectual woman is revealed in his statement to bring the novella to a close. They argue until the very final moments, and the novella ends with Pamela raising her voice in a declaration of her ‘cleanliness’ against his charges of moral depravity. In the final line, while Pamela is emotionally distraught, the protagonist proclaims, “When, Lord, will you give men the courage of some prostitutes” [New York 80, p. 74]. This final line is a

deeply personal reflection, since he utters it to himself only, similar to the ‘internal monologue’ earlier. The very fact that he praises her courage, *without* her knowing, maintains the competing structures of the novella, in which they remain ideologically opposed publicly until the bitter end; yet this opposition is also artificial, in that the protagonist is privately conflicted and confused by her femininity and the courage it exudes. Certainly, this closing statement not only points to the artifice of their clash, but confesses a deep identification with this American woman. The courage he is referencing is tied to her confidence, her intelligence, and especially her defiance of *his* gendered expectations of a woman. She initiates *his* journey of self-discovery in this charged interaction by presenting him with a model of femininity that he had never thought possible, eliciting his private praise as a step towards reassessing his own cultural and ideological bearings.

The identity politics involved in Pamela acting as the sole representative of America is also a source of the protagonist’s crisis. Due to the restrictive nature of this novella, in its lack of description and characters, Pamela embodies values that the protagonist associates with America, be it materialism, freedom, or immorality. Each value that the protagonist attaches to Pamela is part of his effort to fix her to some American essence. This drive to uncover an American ‘essence’ is an impulse found in other travel writings on America, such as those of Simone de Beauvoir and Jean Baudrillard.¹⁰³ But where these travelogues did offer attempts to characterize America through a broader sector of its population and geography, *New York 80* posits a singular American character who is constantly slipping from the protagonist’s essentializing grasp

¹⁰³ The work I’m referring to here is found in Siegel, Kristi ed. *Issues in Travel Writing: Empire, Spectacle and Displacement* (New York: Peter Lang, 2002), more specifically in Marco Diani’s article on Baudrillard in the same book, p. 123-134, and Gary Totten’s article on Simone de Beauvoir, p. 135-150.

– only adding to his confusion and destabilization. For example, the protagonist attempts to paint Pamela as untrustworthy and deceitful, even wondering who ‘planted’ her, the CIA, FBI, the Mosad, or the Secret Police [*New York* 80, p. 42-43]. He projects his distrust onto her even though it is totally unwarranted, as she is painfully honest and completely transparent throughout the text. His characterization of her can be read as a projection of a sentiment in the Arab world that understood America as deceitful, especially in the political sphere. It seems possible that this projection is a venting of frustration with America for sponsoring the Camp David Accords of 1979, or referencing collusion between Sadat and the American security apparatus as inspiration for the paranoid references to the American, Israeli and Egyptian security apparatuses in the text. The protagonist resorts to hyperbole and misrepresentation of Pamela as a result of the discord between what he *assumes* she represents, versus what he *actually* encounters. She constantly defies his assumptions regarding America, whether we are discussing ideas of morality, honesty, or humanity. Most perplexing is her decision to work as a prostitute despite her academic background in psychology. This leaves him totally perplexed because his assumptions and preconceptions of professional roles and occupations are dismantled. America, for the protagonist, is revealed here to be a place of possibility and diversity, even when refracted through a single character.

While all of these various textual elements contribute to the protagonist’s identity crisis, stepping back from the text, and understanding its relationship to the historical context is crucial. After the 1967 War the Arab world was thrown into a profound crisis of identity, marked by the demise of Pan-Arabism and its supra-nationalistic sense of Arab selfhood reaching an apogee with Nasser’s United Arab Republic. The 1967 War,

followed closely by Nasser's death in 1970, initiated a period of cynicism and questioning. In Egypt, President Sadat's political alignments away from the USSR and towards a privatization model akin to US interests benefited some, but marginalized other sectors of society immensely. In that *New York 80* is a meditation on America through an Arab subjectivity at a particular moment, it speaks to the psychological crisis in general, but it is also a commentary on American infiltration in the region in particular. The protagonist's crisis when confronting Pamela Graham, as detailed, reveals an Arab subjectivity unprepared to deal with the outside world. While he attempts to puff his chest and claim a moral high ground, Pamela – and America – present a reality that is far more diverse, nuanced and transparent than he expected. His own reality, on the other hand, appears exceedingly homogenous and uniform in comparison. What is profound is that the protagonist's encounter with America forces him to face his own fallibility, as symbolized in his crisis state. This fallibility is predicated on an attempt to circumscribe Pamela in some homogeneous American mold, but she is constantly defying such reductionism. Therefore the novella urges its reader to think beyond one's assumptions of the Other and question one's own cultural assumptions.

Identification through Cultural Narratives in *New York 80*

The charged interaction between the protagonist and Pamela Graham runs the gamut between the protagonist's confident assertions of self and sense of destabilization. Within this spectrum, interesting points of identification emerge that bind the protagonist to particular culturally imbued moments and images. These brief cultural narratives are triggered by the main narration, but then interrupt this narration, as the narrator shifts

from the present debate between the protagonist and Pamela Graham to depict brief episodes from the his past in Egypt. Literary theorists who utilize geographics in their study of literary narratives refer to these cultural stories *within* the story as ‘vertical narratives’, since they present a temporal stop or metaphorical ‘stake in the ground’ that interrupts the progression of the main narrative if we envision its movement along a horizontal axis.¹⁰⁴ These tales are often fascinating for what they add to a work in terms of cultural content in addition to offering a sense of causality to larger events in a work. As Susan Friedman explains in *Mappings*, “The task of the critic involves decoding and contextualizing these discourses within the larger terrain of cultural and political history.”¹⁰⁵ Vertical narratives also factor into the process of identification, especially in a novella like *New York 80*, since it really only features two characters. The vertical narratives here are exclusively drawn from the protagonist’s past, and bind him to particular places, ideas and traumatic moments that influence his development.

The first vertical narrative in *New York 80* emerges about a quarter of the way into the narration, after the protagonist has voiced his distaste for Pamela’s profession and she has offered her own defense, which takes jabs at his romanticism. Her defense does not convince the protagonist, but it does reveal Pamela’s witty and intelligent demeanor. The protagonist is intensely struck by her intelligence, prompting the insertion of a cultural narrative in the form of a memory of the protagonist’s first encounter with a prostitute in Egypt. This memory is drawn from his student days in Cairo, when his roommate used to hire prostitutes, often sharing them with his own father. The protagonist recalls how their apartment gained a reputation amongst local

¹⁰⁴ Friedman, Susan Stanford. *Mappings; Feminism and the Cultural Geographies of Encounter*. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1998), p. 28.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid.

prostitutes as a safe haven of sorts, and prostitutes would frequently come in groups of three or four to spend the night sleeping on the tile floor of the living room. He recalls treating one for scabies, and helping another who experienced paralyzing nightmares. The most devastating experience was his discovery of a vial of iodine in the handbag of one of the prostitutes. Upon inquiring about this vial, the prostitute told him that she planned to drink it if the Morals Police (*būlīs al-ādāb*) ever caught her, as the liquid would either kill her, or more likely, she would be rushed to the hospital, where she could comfortably recover ‘without the smell of men,’ as she stated [*New York 80*, p. 21]. Either way, she would be relieved of the horrors of her current existence. Her plan also included a contingency in the instance that she survived, as she would procure another vial of iodine before leaving the hospital by seducing a male nurse before being discharged.

This cultural narrative is instrumental in providing new insight into the life of our Egyptian protagonist. Fresh off his bold statements of disgust for this American prostitute and ‘her kind,’ as he puts it, this cultural narrative reveals a man who demonstrates incredible empathy for the prostitutes in his native Egypt. The deep empathy he evinces in housing them, listening to their stories of abuse, and even helping cure their maladies is sharply contrasted with his fellow countrymen, and roommate’s conduct who shares prostitutes with his father. This narrative establishes a contrast between the protagonist’s interaction with Egyptian prostitutes who are homeless and driven to prostitution via abuse and hardship, and Pamela Graham, who is a proud and confident American prostitute. How do we understand this amazing contrast between a

protagonist who acts saintly towards prostitutes in his own country and brazenly lambastes them on American soil?

The primary difference that prompts his diametrically opposed reactions are a combination of locale and socio-economic class; the protagonist empathizes with the poor and destitute, which Pamela Graham certainly is not. In thinking of this contrast in how the protagonist judges women, it is clear that he establishes an unequal comparison. Firstly, the sheer number of prostitutes he interacted with in Cairo, and all their tragic tales, are a critical mass in comparison to Pamela, as the sole representative of her profession in America. There really is no equivalency, and the comparison denies the presence of American prostitutes, in the plural, driven to the profession by horrible socio-economic circumstances like their Egyptian counterparts with whom he interacts in Cairo. Essentially this cultural narrative succeeds in softening the initially harsh contours of the protagonist, but it establishes a harmful contrast between Egyptian and American prostitutes that stereotypes both nationalities. It recalls the notion of America's 'streets paved in gold' on a new literary plane; here it is a wealthy, well-dressed American prostitute representing a new 'gold standard' against oppressed Egyptian counterparts. The contrasts established here are further adumbrated through the opposition between the novella's setting in a fancy New York bar, where he meets this seemingly intelligent and well put-together American woman, and his memories of his apartment in Cairo, a place of squalor infiltrated by disease and filth.

The intensity and emotional affect this cultural narrative precipitates in the protagonist is profound, and it animates the main narrative upon return. When we left the narration, the two had been discussing Pamela's price, and that is the exact moment we

return to in the narration after the revelation of this Cairene memory. Pamela senses some change in the protagonist's demeanor, a result of this cultural narrative to which readers are privy, and she interprets this change as distress, asking him what concerns him. He replies that he is afraid of the vile of iodine in *her* handbag, confusing his Cairene memory with her presence as a prostitute. She is perplexed by his comment, replying, "there aren't any liquids in my bag except Este Lauder perfume, the most modern and fantastic perfume in the world today, sniff ..." [*New York 80*, p. 22]. She sprays some on his hand and he recoils as if the perfume is burning him, like iodine. The scene edges on the surreal, as the protagonist is mistakenly imposing his own cultural memories upon her, and her expensive perfume becomes a material incarnation of his difficulty in accepting the difference between Pamela and the Egyptian prostitutes. The cultural narrative is merely a flash in real time, but its impact is profound, as the protagonist momentarily loses grip on the American reality in which he is situated. When she asks him what he thinks the perfume costs, he replies "five minutes in the bathroom at Qasr al-^cAyni Hospital," a reference to how the Egyptian prostitute would secretly procure her iodine [*New York 80*, p. 22].

This particular cultural narrative, and its weave into the main narration, gives emotional and material contours to the protagonist's encounter with America. His impactful memory emerges for its comparative value, and serves to highlight the stark contrast between the protagonist's experience in Cairo and America, hinging yet again on the novella's obsession with wealth in America. This obsession connects *New York 80* to thematic concerns also present in the *Mahjar* period, where accumulation of wealth and the fetishization of consumer goods featured prominently in a number of these early

narratives. There are clear similarities between the transformative powers of the cuckoo clock in Nu^cayma's *Sa^cat al-Kūkū* and this vial of iodine/perfume in *New York 80*. Overall, this memory results in a surreal scene replete with a mixture of severely contrastive textual elements: his Cairene past and American present; helpless poverty and boastful extravagance. These textual elements intertwine to destabilize the protagonist's foundation.

The second cultural narrative that interrupts the main narration occurs when Pamela knocks on his hotel room door, imploring him to continue their conversation. This moment is shot through with confusion, as the protagonist has just finished reading the list of warnings posted on the back of the hotel room door which explicitly cautions against allowing strangers into the room. Her sudden presence at this moment, not to mention her claims of being a psychologist, initiate a flight from reality. Being genuinely unaware of her intentions, he begins to think about the possibility for her 'being sent' for him, to assassinate him. At this desperate moment, perhaps accounting for a split second in the time of main narration, he lapses into his memories. His memories call forth a mix of traumatizing pastiches from his childhood, as he remembers being hit on the head by his Arabic teacher, then ridiculed by fellow classmates for a drawing he produced, and chided by his step-mother for his destined failure in life. These childhood memories initiate a narrative transition into the symbolic realm, where he recasts himself as a vulnerable seedling whose resilient growth and deep roots have enabled his triumph over these childhood obstructions.

Unlike the first cultural narrative, which had a direct connection with events preceding it, this cultural narrative is composed of an indirect linkage between the present

moment and the past. The instant she knocks on the door he is consumed with fear over a stranger attempting to break into his room as the warnings state, and she *becomes* this intruder. Her unexpected reappearance adds to this fear a jolt of self-doubt that their interaction has already established in the narrative. Taken together, fear and self-doubt, he retreats to his childhood memories, where he summons this triumphant symbolic image of the seedling battling against all odds to achieve improbable success. His triumphant personal narrative contains the following heroic musings:

He cracked the earth open and split the air, rising to become the highest mast of the largest ship. He crossed seas; he fought battles; he freed captives and captured women – from royalty and slave girls alike – and made of them his harem. With extraordinary power latent in him he did all that. Single-handedly he did all that. Would he now be afraid of a woman? [*New York* 80, p. 38-39]

This dramatic vision of self-triumph reveals fascinating points of identification and self-fashioning by the protagonist. His own triumph was born out of rejection and ridicule at an early age, and his reaction produces a ‘pull-yourself-up-from-the-bootstraps’ tale commonly associated with American individualistic lore. In addition, the paternalistic and misogynistic images in the tale reveal his subconscious dreams of domination.

The function of these revelations and identifications is to lay bare this individual, his motivations, and desires, and, in doing so, complicate his affiliations. In considering his traumatic childhood, the reader is meant to sympathize with him, as his earliest adversaries were family members and instructors who were supposed to act as pillars of support. When he re-casts himself, the irony of his American-tinged bootstraps story is fascinating; despite the polemics he has waged against America, he epitomizes rugged individualism so foundational to American identity that he is confronting at the present

moment. But the most imaginative and hyperbolic musings of the protagonist add demeaning misogynistic practices to these rugged individualist affiliations, as he imagines keeping a *harem* of conquered women. These remarks attach him to Orientalist stereotypes of Arab patriarchy. This unique mixture of elements reveals the simple fact that the protagonist identifies through a heterogeneous array of cultural positions from an early age, at times American in flavor, other times Arab, and at all times underscoring his already hybrid constitution. So the simple question that ends the paragraph quoted above, and returns us to the main narration, “would he now be afraid of a woman?” is fateful to say the least. Indeed he is afraid of Pamela, as her provenance in the advanced world, her intelligence, and the equality she demands in social interaction are all affronts to his amorphous, ever-evolving sense of selfhood. Pamela has been drawn up, as the novella states, as his antithesis (*naqīḍa*), against whom his own inner contradictions unravel.

Both cultural narratives in *New York 80* present deeply personal aspects of the protagonist’s ‘character-in-crisis’, which flesh out aspects of his intense ambivalence, private anxieties, and hybrid constitution. As the novella reveals the constituent elements of this Arab subjectivity’s identity crisis, these revelations accrue and complicate the authoritative presence he maintains in his encounter with his American counterpart. All of this tension in the novella clamors for a resolution, but this narratological impulse for resolution, whether achieved between Pamela and the protagonist, or between the protagonist’s authoritative and conflicted version of self, are never brought to fruition. The protagonist never truly recognizes his own hybrid constitution, nor does he accept his identifications with Pamela as genuine representations of self. Abstracting this dynamic

through the East-West encounter, *New York 80* becomes a meditation on the crisis of dealing with America's global economic and ideological rise in the world. This American rise is occurring while the Eastern self is embroiled in a deep identity crisis, and while ideological differences between the East and West are emphasized and commonalities are minimized in the novella, it is clear that the protagonist's state of becoming – and the East's – involves a hybrid constitution seeking resolution. It is decidedly *not* resolved here, and in this lack of resolution the novella is imploring its Arab readers to confront potentially conflicting and hybrid elements of their own identities.

Raḍwa ʿAshūr and al-Rihla

Raḍwa ʿAshūr (b. 1946) is an Egyptian author and academic who continues to publish up through the present day. Her novelistic output features a number of historical novels, often presenting fictional characters set in pivotal moments of Arab history. For example, she has depicted events as far back as the fall of Muslim Spain in her *Granada* trilogy, but she has also covered more recent events, like her recent consideration of the Palestinian *Nakba* in her novel *al-Ṭaṭṭūriyya* (2010). The work under consideration here is her first work of length, *al-Rihla: Ayyām Ṭāliba Miṣriyya fī Amrīkā* (*The Journey: The Days of an Egyptian Student in America*, 1983). While Raḍwa ʿAshūr has made her name as a novelist, this first literary effort is an autobiographical piece that narrates her experience as a graduate student in Amherst, Massachusetts between 1973-1975, where she completed a doctoral degree in African-American Literature. Not surprisingly, *al-Rihla* reads as if it was composed by a novelist in the making, as it develops a fluid

narrative structure through a selective presentation of her experiences in America.

°Ashūr, who inhabits the role of narrator and protagonist, is critical, curious and reflective as she processes this encounter with America through her own unique process of identification abroad.

The narration of *al-Rihla* begins in the Cairo airport on the day of °Ashūr's departure for America. The geographical setting of *al-Rihla's* narration is almost exclusively America, with brief descriptions of Paris and Athens on return trips home. Egypt is only briefly a site of narration in the work's opening pages, as she waits for her plane to America. The text is guided by °Ashūr's experience as a graduate student at the University of Massachusetts, and many of the mundane events of life as a student create the foundation of the narrative. The narrative is infused with energy and vibrancy through exciting experiences and memorable events that inflect this foundation, such as attending a wedding, visiting New York and Boston, witnessing a mass 'streak' of nude students, along with many other experiences. Throughout each experience, the mundane and exciting alike, °Ashūr is constantly judging and reflecting on the people and places that animate and personalize these events. Her primary point of identification, through which these judgments and reflections emanate, is her stance as a politically committed leftist third-world subject. It is from this position, and her stated resistance to American imperialism, that her subjectivity is both solidified and problematized.

After arriving in Amherst, Raḍwa begins the process of matriculation, delving deeply into her studies while attempting to acclimate to life in America. Her studies progress smoothly, as she explores African-American history, culture and literature. Her process of acclimation is far trickier. Raḍwa's American journey is set against perpetual

feelings of alienation that accompany her existence in America, where she is far from her home, her Palestinian husband Murīd, and her family in Egypt. This multilayered sense of alienation is intensified at times, such as meeting her first roommate, a spoiled American who is extremely religious and intolerant towards the idea of sharing a room with a foreigner, not to mention a Muslim. Raḍwa attempts to counter her feelings of alienation by developing friendships with other foreign students, and she feels especially comfortable with international students who share a sense of estrangement from their American environment. She becomes friends with Africans and African-Americans in her department, identifying with them through their minority status in America. The early portion of narration tends to focus on the challenging process of acclimation, highlighted by her identifications with certain people and ideas, and disassociations with other elements of her American environment.

The three years in Raḍwa's life that the text's narration spans is punctuated by a series of experiences that mark her time in America. After an initial phase in narration devoted to her adjustment to the graduate student residence and her academic department, the narrative's action jumps from one event to another, including visits to Boston, New York City and Toronto. In addition to these visits, Raḍwa returns to Cairo at different intervals, trips that necessitate stops in Athens and Paris. Local events also color the narration, including an African-American colleague's wedding, and a massive convention in Amherst for Guru Maharaji in the summer of 1974. Each of these visits and events are presented for the impact they have on Raḍwa's encounter with America, and she is quick to evaluate each event through her subjective, and frequently political, critical lens. During her visit to Boston with German friends, for example, she scoffs at the Freedom

Trail and the five killed at the Boston Massacre, choosing to contemplate instead the recent massacre of over 5,000 Chileans at a stadium under Pinochet's American-supported regime. In New York City, which she visits with her husband Murīd, she consciously snubs a visit to the Statue of Liberty in order to walk the streets of Harlem. Raḍwa's decisions and reactions during each visit and event reveal aspects of her identification, which often develops in contrast to America, but at other times, her American encounter reveals intense affiliations with aspects of American culture and society that require further investigation.

Early Identifications in *al-Rihla*

Al-Rihla wastes no time at all in defining crucial aspects of Raḍwa's character and affiliations. As she is waiting to board her plane to America she thumbs through the contents of her travel bag, extracting a few items and discussing the memories they conjure. The items include a facsimile of a Ṣalāḥ Jāhīn drawing,¹⁰⁶ whose text would become a popular nationalistic anthem in Egypt sung by °Abd al-Ḥalīm Ḥāfīz.¹⁰⁷ The other two items are both family photos, one a singed photo taken days before the Six-Day War, and the other is an older family photo from 1962, with her father front and center. Raḍwa contextualizes each item, and her contemplation of each reveals the deep meaning they hold for her, as well as the particular identifications she establishes with their content as she awaits departure.

¹⁰⁶ Ṣalāḥ Jāhīn (1930-1986) is an immensely popular Egyptian poet, lyricist and cartoonist. His popularity crossed social class due to his famous colloquial poetry, a literary form with which his name will always be associated.

¹⁰⁷ °Abd al-Ḥalīm Ḥāfīz (1929-1977) was one of the most popular Arab singers in the 20th century. His is known as *The Nightingale* for his beautiful voice, and he has reached iconic status in the Arab world, often mentioned along with Umm Kulthoum and other greats.

The first two items, the Ṣalāḥ Jāhīn drawing, and the singed photo from 1967, constitute an important pair, marked by their contrast from one another. °Ashūr even comments on the glossy appearance of the Jāhīn drawing in contrast to the faded, burned edges of the 1967 family photo. These items adumbrate °Ashour’s deep connections to Egypt and her empathy for her nation as it continues to reel from the defeat of 1967, even six years after the War. The bitterness and burn of defeat represented by the 1967 family photo is only intensified by the presence of the glossy Jāhīn drawing that precedes it, whose words would become a popular nationalist anthem in the sixties. These two items, singled out as the very first topics of this text, reveal Raḍwa’s unwavering bond with her native Egypt, in both victory and defeat.

The third item Raḍwa contemplates evokes a complex stream of personal affiliations. The item itself is just a simple family picture from 1962 with her father standing prominent in the front, with the family surrounding him. The composition of the photo beckons a focus on her father, and she reacts to his picture by recalling her father’s ambivalence to her departure for America. He voiced his desire for her to travel and reach her full potential, but also expressed what she terms his ‘rural Muslim ethos,’ which included his desire to keep her at home and confined, in line with more conservative patriarchal values. The fact that Raḍwa is contemplating her father’s contradictory desires as she awaits her plane reveals the strength of her conviction to pursue her professional goals, since she was obviously successful in persuading him to allow her to travel and study. Detailing her father’s ambivalence also points to her own connection to this traditional ethos, even if she is defying its restrictive gendered logic.

She is both a product of traditional society, and positions herself as being actively engaged in reshaping its precepts.

The gendered evocations marked in her father's ambivalence do not end here. Raḍwa's imagination shifts from her actual father to a metaphorical father, as she recalls Rifāʿa al-Ṭaḥṭāwī, the Muslim Chaplain who accompanied the first modern Egyptian mission to Paris under Mohammad Ali, and whose account of this trip stands among the pioneering works of modern Arabic literature. In evoking Ṭaḥṭāwī, whose image was not among those items in her bag, but present in her mind, she is writing *herself* into the pantheon of Arab travelers to the West. She is quick to point out that there are important distinctions between Ṭaḥṭāwī's trip to the west in the early 19th century and her own, as she writes, "Like Rifāʿa I was on my way to far away lands, but I was not going with the neutrality of someone who doesn't know anything about the world around him" [*al-Rihla*, p. 6].¹⁰⁸ This statement, in its disregard of gender distinctions, simply stating 'like Rifāʿa,' boldly inscribes a female perspective onto the literary landscape populated by Arab men who traveled West and wrote about it. In addition, the statement clarifies her politically committed stance in heading to America. Her comment concerning her lack of neutrality is the first evocation of what will develop throughout the text into her leftist, anti-Imperialist politics. Considering the fact that she is traveling to America, which she understands to be a neo-imperialist power, this stance is confrontational. Conjuring up the image of al-Ṭaḥṭāwī she mobilizes this historical figure to gain personal meaning, since her noted contrasts from him achieves multiple affiliations; she is an Arab *female* traveler; she is aware of global affairs; and she is a committed leftist.

¹⁰⁸ ʿAshūr, Raḍwa. *al-Rihla: ʿAyyām Ṭālība Miṣriyya fi ʿAmrīkā* (Beirut: Dār al-Ādāb, 1983), pg. 6. My translations.

The signifying power of this family photo is seemingly endless, as the date of its creation is connected to another momentous event in Raḍwa's life. Raḍwa recalls that the very same week her family sat for this photo she attended a lecture by the female Algerian revolutionary Jamīla Bū Ḥurayd at Cairo University. This lecture left an indelible mark on her existence. Everything from Bū Ḥurayd's revolutionary rhetoric, to her simple clothes, were an inspiration to a young Raḍwa. This lecture inspired her own political activism, leading to her participation in student protests in Egypt in the early 1970s, just before her departure for America.

The contemplation of the items in her handbag as she awaits departure for America serves to situate Raḍwa firmly within her Egyptian environment as a disenchanted post-67 nationalist, a committed leftist, a groundbreaking Arab feminist traveler, and a revolutionary anti-Imperialist. What is fascinating is that these opening pages, set in the waiting room of the airport in Cairo, represent the *only* portion of narration set in Cairo. While the opening pages are just a mere sliver of the entire work, their location and content serve to affirm her affiliations to her native Egypt and the leftist political groups to which she is committed just as she is about to depart. This opening will prove crucial as the foundational starting block of an Arab female subjectivity about to face a plethora of changes and challenges in America. She is adamant that in traveling to America she won't be 'entranced by the lights of Imperialism' as happened to Ṭaḥṭāwī and other early Arab travelers to Europe [*al-Riḥla*, p. 6]. Yet despite this admission, the simple fact is that her encounter with America will test her ideas and her stable Egyptian foundation in unexpected ways. While at the outset of the journey she freely admits that she is not venturing to America as a neutral, unknowing

soul, by the end of her journey, she confesses that this lack of neutrality has likely resulted in a biased account. As she states in one of the final short chapters of *al-Rihla*, “I often ask myself if I could have looked at America with an objective eye. Well, how can one who is ‘stung’ speak with an instructor’s patience about the particulars of the scorpion” [*al-Rihla*, p. 168]. These revelations of bias, presented on both the opening and final pages of the work, are instructive; *al-Rihla* is a consciously subjective account of America from a politically and ideologically astute leftist Arab woman.

Affiliations and Politics in America

The strong and assertive Arab woman cast in the opening pages of this text in Cairo then transitions immediately into her new American environment. Not long after her arrival, Raḍwa meets an Israeli student and an American student who had recently returned from serving in Vietnam. Meeting these two individuals, in particular, accentuate the definitive break with home, as she begins her journey into the American tapestry. She is rendered speechless in merely meeting both students. Raḍwa’s intense engagement in leftist politics and activism, which includes opposition to the Israeli government and the American war in Vietnam, left her shocked in confronting human embodiments of political positions she opposed. These initial meetings simply mark the fact that Raḍwa’s life, politically speaking, has turned on its head in America, and she would have to carefully negotiate her foreign environment. In these early meetings with an Israeli and American Vietnam veteran, as she relates, she became convinced of the wisdom of the adage “silence is golden” [*al-Rihla*, p. 9]. Of course, Raḍwa would not stay silent for long.

Unlike *New York 80*, where the encounter with America is represented as a dialectic clash, the sensitivities present *al-Rihla* focus on Raḍwa's attempts to consciously affiliate herself with, and against, various elements of American society. The first group with which she develops a strong affinity includes professors and colleagues in her African-American Studies department. This is a natural bond, formed from a combination of shared academic interests, and strengthened by a shared focus on the history and culture of a marginalized group. This focus on the marginalized within America aligns with Raḍwa's political positioning on a global scale, as a representative of the third-world that has been marginalized by Imperialist powers. Often her leftist political affiliations aligned with her colleagues political leanings, as she felt a sense of comfort when dining at a professor's house where a large portrait of Ché Guevara covered a wall. Raḍwa's identifications with African-Americans were reciprocated within her department in ways that she did not expect. While Raḍwa's political activism kept her focused on identifications with the marginalized, African-Americans in her department cherished the fact that she was Egyptian, as her nationality evoked proud connections between the African continent and the Ancient Egyptian Empires, not to mention contemporary evocations of Nasser's liberationist rhetoric that had spread across the continent. A supportive reciprocity developed in Raḍwa's identification with her colleagues, through politics, culture and geography.

Outside of her academic department Raḍwa developed ties to two other groups, fellow foreign students, and politically committed leftists. Her bonds with fellow foreign students were not necessarily strong, in terms of shared ideological commitments or political interests, but more a result of a communal sense of estrangement (*ghurba*). As

she states, “no one said anything about this, even though it seems we were all bound together by this pact of estrangement to which we clung” [*al-Rihla*, p. 67]. This pact became a fragile but necessary affiliation, as she expresses elsewhere, had it not been for this group of similarly estranged students, bound by their ‘foreignness,’ she would eat in the cafeteria alone.

Her bonds with fellow leftists on campus cut through a different cadre of students, and given her commitment to leftist politics and involvement in student protests in Cairo, they represent much deeper bonds than those with foreign students. She helped establish a student organization called ‘The Committee for the Defense of the Rights of Palestinians and Arabs,’ and along with the small number of Arab students who led this charge, they were joined by, as she details, “American students who were Trotskyites, Communists and from the New Left, along with African-Americans, Puerto Ricans, and students from Africa and Latin America” [*al-Rihla*, p. 69]. It is interesting to note here a feature that will be analyzed later, how Raḍwa *explicitly* qualifies the American students by their political affiliations, yet sees no need to do the same for the students from diverse ethnic backgrounds. This underlines her assumption that all minorities identify through a shared sense of marginalization, since here she holds it true that ethnic minorities, and other representatives of the third-world, would also identify with marginalized political positions, since they too have been ‘stung’ by the imperialist scorpion. Raḍwa’s various affiliations with particular groups adumbrate the fact that her encounter with America is political at its core, as her affiliations and alignments primarily fall along these lines.

Given the fact that Raḍwa's oppositional politics are foundational to her subjectivity, it is not surprising that *al-Rihla* features numerous expressions of her opposition to American society. Examples of her opposition to America emphasize how Raḍwa's process of identification realizes the dualism inherent to identity and the process of identification, in that she is seeking commonality by identifying *with* certain groups and ideas, but also through identifying *against* groups and ideas, stressing difference.¹⁰⁹ Raḍwa's identification against America represents her attempt to read America through a very particular political lens; a process that is not always as clearly demarcated as Raḍwa may have expected. A couple of examples from the text will illustrate.

In the spring of her first year in America, Raḍwa accepts an invitation from fellow German students to visit Boston. The German couple she travels with had planned the trip, which revolved around visiting tourist sites in the city. As they begin their morning at the Freedom Trail in Boston, Raḍwa's opposition begins to rear its head. She explains to the reader how, despite her love of history, the American Revolution had never really interested her. This is a curious comment, given her deep interest in history, especially resistance and oppositional politics. As they follow the Freedom Trail, Raḍwa's indifference towards the Freedom Trails boils over when her German friend, playing the role of tour guide, informs her that they have arrived at the site of the Boston Massacre. The word 'massacre' sets off a wave of emotion for Raḍwa, as she finds it unjust that this word could be applied to the death of five individuals which sparked the American Revolution, when just months before Pinochet had *truly* massacred over five thousand of his own citizens in a stadium in Chile. She continues her comparisons, thinking of the

¹⁰⁹ The implications of the implicit duality of identity as invoking sameness and difference is discussed in: Hall, Stuart. "Who Needs Identity?" from du Gay, P. Evans, J. and Redman, P (eds), *Identity: a Reader* (London: Sage Publications, 2000), p. 17-18.

Six Day War in her native Egypt, and the recent events of Black September in Jordan, examples of other *real* massacres, in her estimation. Overwhelmed by the moment Radwa tells her friends that she intends to leave their tour. With this defiant act, the narration of the entire Boston trip effectively ends. Since nothing else is reported about her trip to Boston, the next paragraph finds her back in her room in Amherst reflecting on the postcard size print of Picasso's *Guernica* she purchased at Boston's Museum of Fine Arts.

This entire episode in Boston clearly demonstrates the lack of neutrality that accompanies Radwa to America, something she warned her reader about at the start of the work. She is incapable of appreciating revolutionary America because she filters these events through her 'presentist' understanding of American imperial involvement in the world. The supreme irony of her reaction is certainly not lost, as she is being hyper-critical of a revolution that succeeded in defeating colonial rule, a political position she would ideologically support regardless of time or place. The prominent issue brought forth by Radwa's reaction is that her present political preoccupations with American global power blind her ability to appreciate any aspect of the *dominant* American historical narrative that casts American in a positive light, even when this narrative includes revolutionary moments. Framing her opposition through the use, or misuse, of the word 'massacre' throughout history is just a convenient trigger to unleash her deep emotional reactions to America as a contemporary imperial power. In addition, the fact that she stages her reaction in front of friends who organized the tour represents an act of public defiance, only intensified by her abrupt departure, and symbolic purchase of the *Guernica* postcard.

Through this scene and others, *al-Rihla* introduces an important theme in the Arab encounter with America, this being an obsession with the contradictions of the American historical narrative. The example from Raḍwa's trip to Boston is a particularly muddled example, as she mixes history with current events, but at other points in the text, there is a politically driven effort to emphasize dark aspects of the country's history. Raḍwa's readings in African-American history highlight her interest in the slave trade and the plight of slaves, and she also narrates devastating moments in Black history from the 20th century for her readers. She also highlights the massacres of America's Native American population, part and parcel of the American historical record. Since Palestine is constantly on Raḍwa's mind, given her commitment to pan-Arab causes, her focus on the exile and elimination of America's native population is an obsession that reverberates through her pan-Arab political consciousness, drawing natural parallels to Palestinians, especially given her husband's provenance.

Raḍwa's mixed associations with American history, while a stranger in America, evoke Frantz Fanon's notion of 'unhomeliness.' This is a notion in which "Fanon recognizes the crucial importance, for subordinated peoples, of asserting their indigenous cultural traditions and retrieving their repressed histories."¹¹⁰ 'Ashūr, and other Arabs who write the encounter with America, display elements of 'unhomeliness' not only in focusing on their own 'repressed histories,' but also on those histories repressed *within* the American historical narrative as well. *al-Rihla* flirts with the warning implicit in Fanon's notion, in that Raḍwa does seem to get caught up in the celebratory romance with the past, perhaps given the connections she invokes between oppressed native

¹¹⁰ Homi Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 1994), p. 9.

minorities of American history and the current state of the Palestinian people. The preoccupation with American minorities and their histories will be evident in later works on the American encounter as well. The feeling of ‘unhomeliness’ here leads to an intense reflection and comparison of transnational stories, and histories, of oppression. The focus on history in *al-Rihla* also emphasizes the continuation of the instructive role of literature on the American encounter in educating its readership about America, as previously witnessed in the *Mahjar* writing.

Returning to the text, a very different event occurs in the summer of 1974, when the Guru Maharishi Mahesh visits the University of Massachusetts campus for a multi-day spiritual event.¹¹¹ The campus becomes flooded with his followers from across the United States and beyond. As Raḍwa describes the scene, she is overwhelmed by the mass of humanity that infiltrates Amherst, claiming that it turned into a hippie colony. As an observer of this raucous scene, Raḍwa is disenchanted by American counter-culture in her fixation on the political aspects, or lack thereof, of this event. She is disgusted by the notion that this Guru is helping his followers meditate so that they will be able to ‘refrain from thought.’ Raḍwa’s response to this proposition is, “I didn’t come to university in order to learn how to prevent myself from thinking!” [*al-Rihla*, p. 88]. She finds this aspect of American counter-culture inimical to her desire for heightened global political awareness. The scene reminds Raḍwa of T.S. Eliot’s *The Wasteland* (1922) especially in the similarities between Eliot’s depiction of a decayed post World War I western culture and the counter-culture she witnesses in 1970s America. The

¹¹¹ The Guru Maharishi Mahesh Yogi (1918-2008) gained fame for the Transcendental Deep Meditation that he taught worldwide. He especially became famous in the 1960s and 70s after members of The Beatles and other celebrities were counted amongst his ardent followers. His trip to UMASS-Amherst, documented here, was one of many stops on his world-wide tour to spread his message.

scene is further intensified by Raḍwa's fixation on a Vietnam veteran attending the event, who is disabled and walking with crutches, hence amplifying the disconnect she perceives between real human suffering caused by America's military operations abroad and the cultural malaise at home.

Raḍwa is at a loss in trying to make sense of this experience through her anti-establishment political position. She portrays the disregard for political activism inherent to this leftist segment of America society as a betrayal and utter escapism. This scene highlights Raḍwa's opposition to the decadence that leftist positions are allowed to express in America. In referencing Eliot to help clarify her own confusion, Raḍwa is also aligning herself with a historical context that she understands to be fitting; in that *The Wasteland* was created in the wake of the devastations of World War I, her reflections on this campus scene come in the wake of the devastation of 1967. The connection is tenuous, at best, but it aligns Raḍwa with a shared sense of psychological devastation from two different, but similar, historical moments. Citing *The Wasteland* resembles her interest in *Guernica* that accompanied her Boston visit, as her reactions to very different experiences results in a retreat to artistic contemplations on destruction.

Raḍwa's process of identification, which winds through various affiliations and oppositions, is revelatory and must be read through a strong Arab subjectivity that is processing her American landscape through intense feelings of anxiety, detachment, and 'unhomeliness' abroad. Raḍwa constantly comments on her own feelings of estrangement (*ghurba*) throughout the text, as she never feels comfortable in America. This aspect of *al-Rihla* adds a new layer of commentary to similar feelings of estrangement expressed in *Book of Khalid* and *New York 80*. While Rihani's text from

1911 dealt with estrangement through a spiritual retreat to the homeland, and *New York 80* features an indignant protagonist attempting to bolster his moralistic profile, *al-Rihla* features a new political awareness. Given Raḍwa's political affiliations, this is not a surprise, as she is hyper-aware of the fact that she is living in the belly of the imperial beast. The tenuous combination of her estrangement from America as a political entity, and her every day existence in America results in this unique identification with particular elements of American society and total rejection of others. She has divided America for her own purposes; she identifies with elements of American society even while she rejects official American political values and historical narratives. This stance does not result in a synthesis of East and West as in *The Book of Khalid*, nor a perpetual clash like *New York 80*, but a conflicted ownership of minority values, critical politics, and revisionist history that results in Raḍwa's own *Amrīkā*, refracted through her estranged subjectivity.

Radwa's Amrīkā through Subjective Ownership

The confessional nature of autobiography reveals Raḍwa to be quite self-conscious throughout *al-Rihla*. This includes her frank awareness of her split affiliations with her American setting. This awareness does not mean that she is self-critical though, as the projection of a confident female leftist circumscribed in the opening pages of *al-Rihla* is a projection of self that Raḍwa does not challenge. Given this narratological reality, it is necessary, in analyzing this text, to look for other textual clues that reveal potential areas of instability or ambivalence in Raḍwa's subjectivity during her encounter with America. The fact is, elements of her self-consciousness, in viewing *herself* as

divided into two 'selves,' in addition to how this division is then actualized in her interaction with America, gives *al-Rihla* unique literary depth.

The notion of Raḍwa's two selves is a repetitive theme throughout *al-Rihla*. At different moments in the text, whether it is standing in front of the mirror, or receiving her student identification card, Raḍwa expresses a sense of distance between the individual staring back at her and the embodied subject we are reading about. These passing references become serious points of reflection on one of her return trips to Egypt, as she is seated in the plane, looking down at her native country. At this moment she claims, "I became two, one individual buckled into the seat of my floating plane in the sky above the city, and another individual fixed in the ground like the roots of a tree or a rock in a wall" [*al-Rihla*, p. 56-57]. This admission can be read as a simple statement on the psychological duality that she is experiencing in living abroad, where the 'fixed' self represents her stable core. But as the narration develops, the very fixity of this self is a point of debate. In a moment of brutal honesty after returning from Cairo Raḍwa reflects on her recent time in Egypt, specifically the grandeur of al-Azhar, but feelings of pride transform into new disappointment. Raḍwa relates, "why did these feelings plague me, the feeling that I am exiled from the history of al-Azhar." She continues, "I am a prisoner of femininity, my bare feet have not even touched [al-Azhar's] familiar carpets, except as an estranged visitor" [*al-Rihla*, p. 61]. Raḍwa's laments concerning al-Azhar, coupled with feeling exiled from Egypt oldest institution of learning, stands in radical contrast to her acceptance in the American academy. In Egypt she has been exiled by virtue of her gender from al-Azhar's sacred walls, whereas she is greeted with open arms by her American peers. Raḍwa's political sensibilities prevent her from praising

America, even though this contrast between al-Azhar and the University of Massachusetts paints America in a positive light. This episode also reveals a rift, or growing instability in the fixed, rooted, and politicized self that had defined Raḍwa from the opening pages. Where her femininity had been a feature of her revolutionary identity, it is here a mark of her *exclusion* from her own society. This episode reveals a growing instability, even a celebration of this instability, as Raḍwa casts herself as a stranger in both Egypt and America, complicating the binary she imagined. Those two selves conjured up while flying above Cairo, one fixed and rooted, the other floating, appear to be in flux partially resultant of her encounter with America and the new realities she has experienced there.

There are a number of other textual manifestations of Raḍwa's confusing experience and inner conflict. These manifestations play out on two levels: the articulation of anxieties and contradictions Raḍwa experiences in America, and discussed above; and Raḍwa's fascinating enactment of her sense of 'ownership' or 'inscription' of America. This idea of 'owning' or 'inscribing' her personal vision of America is presented in a chapter set in New York City, one of the text's most masterful chapters. This notion of ownership or inscription of America was briefly demonstrated during Raḍwa's trip to Boston. In Boston she became infuriated while following the standard American Revolutionary War narrative presented by her German friends leading their tour, and in an act of rejection she left her friends. In the next narrative jump, Raḍwa is back in Amherst with her *Guernica* postcard. The question implicit in this experience that was never answered in her Boston experience was: what did she do and how did she choose to experience America when she abruptly left her German friends? All we know

is that she made her way to Boston's Museum of Modern Art to purchase a Guernica postcard. Luckily, at a variety of junctures, including chapter describing Raḍwa's visit to New York City with her husband, fascinating insights are narrated that answer this question concerning just how Raḍwa experiences *her* America.

In reviewing the text's articulation of anxieties and contradictions in Raḍwa's character, there are various ways the text expresses her conflicting sense of self in America. Only rarely are these articulations very clear, as we discover in her conflicting opinions on UMASS Amherst's twenty-six floor library. This structure is first an object of her derision, as she reproduces the common criticism of this library as a phallic symbol. More substantively, she views this structure as a reflection of the American obsession with superlatives, in that this obsession with the biggest, best, highest, etc., can come at the expense of realistic needs and functions [*al-Rihla*, p. 69]. While she is quick to criticize, she follows these critical comments immediately with a full assessment of the amazing academic resources and services this library provides. This assessment of the library's benefits tempers her initial criticisms, providing a rare moment in this text when personal anti-American politics do not overwhelm her judgments. Raḍwa's anti-establishment and anti-America instincts do give way to ambivalence at certain junctures.

A more complex example of Raḍwa's *read* of the America scene is her interaction with Puerto Rico throughout the text. This interaction begins quite early when she establishes the student group in defense of Palestine, and Puerto Rican students join this organization. As quoted earlier, the Puerto Rican students, like Africans, Latin Americans and other ethnic minorities, do not need to be qualified by their political affiliations like the white Americans who join the group, since Raḍwa assumes that they

were among the marginalized, whose justification for their oppositional political leanings can be understood simply through their geographic origins. This empathy for Puerto Ricans is emphasized later in the text when Raḍwa sees a woman whom she initially presumes is from Upper Egypt sitting at the airport. The woman has deep lines on her face and hands, revealing a life of hard work. Raḍwa assesses this woman, feeling a sense of unity with her, a unity unchanged even after she realizes that the woman is speaking Spanish and from Puerto Rico. Raḍwa's reflection on this Puerto Rican woman, her life of hard work, deep wrinkles, and a seemingly oppressed existence in an 'American colony' maintains the identification Raḍwa has already made, perhaps erroneously, between an imagined Upper-Egyptian post-colonial subject and this Puerto Rican woman – as two equally oppressed female subjectivities separated by the Atlantic Ocean. While this vision aligns perfectly with Raḍwa's understanding of the world, and her neat divisions of humanity, only much later in the text are her assumptions challenged. Late in the text, a Puerto Rican friend explains to her the complexities of Puerto Rican society, and the fact that the majority opinion accepts Territorial Status with America as beneficial. Raḍwa is deflated by this realization, unable to understand how the majority accepts this apparent injustice, as she can only see this political alignment through colonial relationships. What is perhaps more painful is the realization that her belief system itself is showing fissures, and her confidence is shaken by confronting her own faulty assumptions about humanity.

Towards the end of the text, after spending two years in America and having acclimated to a certain degree, Raḍwa's husband Murid visits from Egypt. During Murid's visit they decide to take a trip together to New York City. Having visited New

York City on three previous occasions, Raḍwa acts as de facto tour guide of this trip. This trip is revelatory in the extreme, as Raḍwa presents *her* America to Murid. Raḍwa and Murid's interaction with New York City is reminiscent of Michel de Certeau who, in his influential book *The Practice of Everyday Life*, posits a theorization concerning how individuals bring a city to life, animate it, and claim their own individual sense of ownership over the urban landscape.¹¹² The visit that Raḍwa and Murid make to New York City conveys this sense of ownership that is arguably the most genuine and personal expressions of Raḍwa's encounter with America.

Raḍwa and Murid begin their New York City adventure by ascending to the top of Empire State Building. The grand panoramic view from atop the building is obscured by a dense fog covering the city. Raḍwa and Murid search for the Statue of Liberty, but are not even able to make out its general direction given the climatic conditions. This distorted view of New York City, and the inability to see the city clearly from this panoptic position, is a powerful metaphorical representation of Raḍwa's experience in America. She arrives in America with a particular clarity of vision, derived from a strong sense of self and political awareness, but America itself is far more opaque than she imagined. This provocative starting point for their visit of an opaque and indiscernible urban landscape begs the question, how will Raḍwa clarify and make sense of this city, and by extension, America?

A primary symbolic marker from atop the Empire State Building is the Statue of Liberty, a marker that had great significance in ʿAbd al-Masīḥ Ḥaddād's previously discussed story *Timthāl al-Ḥurriyya (Statue of Liberty)* as well. Shrouded by clouds, the

¹¹² de Certeau, Michel. *The Practice of Everyday Life* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), p. 161-162.

Statue goes unseen atop the Empire State Building, but it remains unseen and *intentionally* unvisited throughout their stay in New York. At multiple junctures Raḍwa and Murid contemplate a visit to the Statue of Liberty, but instead choose to visit other destinations; one day this destination is Harlem, another it is the painting *Guernica* at New York's Museum of Modern Art. The choices are intentional, as Raḍwa and Murid discuss their multitude of options in New York, each time mentioning the Statue of Liberty, each time choosing *not* to visit the Statue. The Statue of Liberty becomes a subject of mockery by the end of their visit, as they attend a Puerto Rican street celebration before they return to Amherst, joking that they should at least purchase a miniature of the Statue, but instead opt to buy a Puerto Rican flag [*al-Rihla*, p. 149]. The decision to forgo a visit to the Statue of Liberty in favor of visiting Harlem and *Guernica* was an enactment of Raḍwa's personal politics on the geography of New York City. These decisions imply a criticism of the concept of 'liberty' in the American political landscape, a concept that certainly has been applied unequally over time and space, since for example, the African-American population of Harlem has experienced American liberty much differently than New York's affluent power brokers. Choosing to visit *Guernica* the following day, and reflecting on its devastating power in depicting a horrible massacre, is also cast in opposition to visiting the Statue of Liberty, implying that the Statue's grandeur and enormity would still pale in comparison to *Guernica*'s devastating affect. Cast against Harlem and *Guernica* the Statue of Liberty is filtered through Raḍwa's subjectivity, and is seemingly transformed into an emblem of injustice, to be avoided. Raḍwa's 'America' is Harlem, Puerto Rican street festivals, and deep reflections on injustice, and it is not a celebration of America's liberty or freedom.

Radwa's unwavering focus on the marginalized and her political affiliations influence her sense of ownership over particular cultural and geographic elements of New York City, and by extension, America.

The particular space Radwa carves out for herself and Murid in their visit to New York City is fleshed out with histories, literary references, and chance meetings that enhance her subjective grip on the city. In preparing Murid for their visit to Harlem, she informs him, and the reader, of the Burrough's history, focusing on the racial divisions between the wealthy white areas in Manhattan, and how Harlem was "left for the Blacks" [*al-Rihla*, p. 133]. She also quotes the vivid 'raisin in the sun' portion of Langston Hughes's poem *Harlem; A Dream Deferred* to give her husband, also a poet, a sense of the Harlem literary experience. When they visit Guernica, again she relates the history of the bombing of this Spanish village, and particular details of Picasso's imagery of the destruction. This heavy mix of history and literature is yet again reminiscent of the 'instructive' drive of the early *Mahjar* writing on the America encounter, in constantly offering lessons and information to its reader. Add to these seemingly scripted events their chance encounter with a young Palestinian man in a pizza shop in Harlem. This youth is excited to meet a fellow Palestinian in Radwa's husband Murid, and gushes about how he cried when Yasser Arafat came to New York to address the United Nations only months earlier. Radwa and Murid also encounter a wide spectrum of individuals, from West Africans, to Puerto Ricans, not to mention a group of Hare Krishnas. The visit to New York City completely personifies Radwa's America, and her celebration of diversity and oppositional political affiliations.

As a reader, we take this journey with Radwa and Murid, in Raḍwa's politicized version of America. She continues to present a bold sense of self throughout this journey, where her own anxieties and feelings of 'unhomeliness' are counteracted by her intrepid sense of ownership of this foreign American place and the choices she makes in positing her literal and figurative imprint on New York. While the strength projected through these choices is emanating from a committed leftist, the self-contained America *she* inscribes erases so many other possibilities. For example, Raḍwa makes no effort to consider the femininity of the Statue of Liberty, as was evident in Ḥaddād's short story from the *Mahjar*. She also never contemplates the very presence of *Guernica* in New York City, removed from its native Spain, as an ironic twist of imperial power and ownership; the financing behind the painting's move to New York City in addition to Raḍwa's very ability to visit it there are part and parcel of the same privileged, imperial position tied to New York City and America. Meanwhile, she celebrates with Puerto Ricans, purchasing a flag instead of a miniature Statue of Liberty, as a rejection of American imperialism, despite the fact, as previously mentioned, that Puerto Ricans don't necessarily identify with *her* neocolonial view of them. The fact is, Raḍwa's politics and strong subjectivity do have the ability to blind her from the myriad possibilities and meanings of her experiences in America. Raḍwa's visit to New York City is both a celebration of her ownership and affiliations with America, and a confirmation of the limitations inherent in her reading of America; as Raḍwa's America is always tethered to her subjective vision of its imperial actions.

Literary Reengagement with America Post 1967

Given the rise of America as a global force over the course of the 20th century it is not surprising that America would reemerge as a setting in the Arab literary realm. This literary reemergence in Arabic reacted to America's powerful new status, especially during the charged political and ideological Cold War years, by producing texts infused with political, ideological and moral overtones. *New York 80* and *al-Rihla* demonstrate this infusion by inserting confrontational and politically aware Arab subjectivities into the American landscape. The protagonist of each text is empowered through their intense reactions to American values, politics and morals. But this literature does not devolve into polemics. Instead it reveals complex levels of contradiction and ambivalence that accentuate the developing Arab literary encounter with America.

The major thematic and structural difference between this post-67 literature of the American encounter and the early *Mahjar* texts is twofold: the post-67 text internalizes the adversarial political relationship between America and the Arab world that emerges in the 20th century; and these texts delve into the psychological and emotional domains of their protagonists, in line with the trends of modernist literature. These differences are natural developments given the shift in historical context as well as the rapid development of literary form in modern Arabic literature.

It is the continuities between the *Mahjar* texts and these post-67 texts that are fascinating. The rampant and fetishized American materialism represented in *The Book of Khalid* and *Sā'at al-Kūkū* are reflected in the composition of Pamela's character in *New York 80*, as she is an embodiment of severe capitalist commodification. The elements of self-criticism initiated in *The Book of Khalid* and *Hikāyāt al-Mahjar*

blossoms in *New York 80* through the protagonist's troubling crisis and self-doubt. The explicit efforts of the *Mahjar* literature to educate and instruct the reader develops in *al-Rihla* through Raḍwa's incessant focus on presenting episodes of American history. The nightmare motif that was present in the *Mahjar* literature through the dream sequence, ghoulish urban representations, or horrible narrative outcomes, is reproduced through the intense fears expressed by *New York 80*'s protagonist. Shifting gender relations are evoked in both eras, as the American literary landscape allows female characters in both periods the possibility of empowerment. Linked to gender, but also distinct in its own right is the Statue of Liberty, which becomes a symbol that plays a major role in these narratives across time, acquiring different valences.

The early *Mahjar* paradigms of the East-West encounter in America which produced synthesis, rejection, and the divided self are all active elements of the post-67 texts. These paradigms are present in new manifestations via the characters' construction and crises. *New York 80* teeters between total rejection of the West through the protagonist's confrontation with Pamela, coupled with his intense, yet hidden, attraction towards her and the values she evinces. This combination of rejection and hidden adulation initiates the protagonist's breakdown, effectively distilling an Arab subjectivity that is divided and crumbling. *Al-Rihla* also favors the rejectionist attitude on the surface through the text's dominant political discourse, but Raḍwa's ardent affinities with particular aspects of America, not to mention the fact that she admits to perceiving herself as divided halfway through the narrative, are the clearest recapitulation of this 'divided self' paradigm.

Chapter 4: Transnational Fictional Encounters with America

Contemporary Literary Encounters with America

The infusion of ideology and politics coursing through *New York 80* and *al-Rihla* captured a confrontational reaction to the West emanating from the Arab world in the 1970s and the early 1980s. This reaction, from a psychological perspective, revealed a nostalgic attempt to recapture and assert the ideological and political confidence of the years preceding 1967, since the post-1967 realities in Egypt and elsewhere in the region revealed just how this confidence was collapsing into an abyss. The fact is, Pan-Arabism, Ba’thism, Nasserism, and many other ‘-isms’ were either faltering as sources of infallible ideological certainty in the Arab World, or were proving incapable of bringing about promised change to a region plagued by military defeats, coups, and regional conflicts. Add to this dire situation of the 70s and early 80s the direct and indirect forms of western intervention in the region, via arms sales, diplomatic positioning, controversial peace treaties, and military interventions. A picture emerges of an increasingly unpredictable Middle East interacting with an ever more interconnected world in the 1980s and beyond. America, for her part, was playing a bigger role in the region than ever, on every front, as she transitioned into the Reagan years and beyond.

Given this tenuous and subordinate position of Arab nations vis-à-vis the United States, the moral rectitude that *New York 80*’s protagonist exudes demonstrates an unexpected confidence and certitude, underlined by a frailty. There is a dual meaning here: the protagonist’s ideological vigor resuscitates memories of post-independence progress and cultural pride, while his concurrent crisis amplifies the doubts inherent in

the present predicament. On another level, this confrontational literary reaction clearly represents the attempt to stand up to America at a time when America is securing a place as the world's preeminent superpower. Considering *al-Rihla*'s intense political positioning as well, these texts take a stand that is particularly hostile towards America's intervention in world affairs. In *al-Rihla* we can read Raḍwa's devotion to oppositional politics as a political affront to America, even while this affront is riddled with the contradictions and ambiguities of her unique American experience.

The confrontational mode presented in the literary encounter with America in *New York 80* and *al-Rihla* shifts towards a new literary sensibility of the American encounter in the 1990s and early 21st century. Sunallah Ibrahim's *Amrikānī* (2003) and °Alā° al-°Aswānī's *Chicago* (2008) emerge from a less reactive and more reflective historical context, marked by a shift from crisis to cultural malaise. In her book *Contemporary Arab Thought* (2010) Elizabeth Kassab describes the years of crisis following 1967 as stifling critical thinking because of the impact of defeat, whereas the decades to follow revealed a "radicalization of both ideology and critique," which involved a deep reflection on the self, and a purposeful questioning of how the Arab world arrived at its current predicament.¹¹³

The intellectual climate in the 1980s and 1990s in the Middle East was undoubtedly affected by the powerful role of religious voices that entered the political arena. Many factors contributed to the emergence of these voices, among them the Iranian Revolution and the rise of Saudi Arabia as a economic power and religious center that attracted professionals from around the Arab world. Not insignificant as well was

¹¹³ Kassab, Elizabeth Suzanne. *Contemporary Arab Thought; Cultural Critique in Comparative Perspective*. (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010), p. 344-346.

Egyptian President Anwar Sadat's release of political prisoners representing "the Islamic Tendency" in the 1970s, this phrase being code for the Muslim Brotherhood as well as other, more radical, 'tendencies.'¹¹⁴ This turn to religion – primarily Islam - as a source of identity and political ideology, was one of many results of the 1967 defeat, since turning to Islam was understood as a shift towards indigenous models of understanding the world in contrast to the Arab world's perceived over-reliance on alien Western models of political philosophy and development preceding 1967. Islam as the solution was so attractive not only for its indigenous status, but also because the popular sway it held over large sectors of the population. One of the side affects of this broad shift was that the intellectual and literary communities in the Arab world were marginalized. Most writers were committed to the secular values that were being demonized for their purported linkages to the West. Personal attacks on authors and academics were not uncommon in this charged environment, as the attempted assassination of Naguib Mahfouz in 1994, or the state-sanctioned apostasy case against Naṣr Ḥāmid Abū Zayd that same year, will attest. Where fear of imprisonment over one's writings had always been a concern of authors in the region, new concerns predicated on extremist elements of political Islam were a second source of fear, especially for secular intellectuals.

The fear of state and extremist reprisals over one's opinions and literary expressions debilitated intellectual life towards the end of the century, and produced a climate of anti-intellectualism. This climate is explored in *Amrīkānlī*, as Sunallah Ibrahim has frequently written about the fate of the Arab intellectual and the politics of writing. The anti-intellectual climate of the 80s and 90s was one aspect of a repressive

¹¹⁴ Cleveland, William L. *A History of the Modern Middle East*. (Oxford: Westview Press, 1994), p. 417.

environment that extended well beyond the circles of leftist intellectuals and the limits placed on their freedom of expression. Women's rights and human rights in general suffered setbacks in numerous Arab countries. Private investment and restructuring of subsidies resulted in food riots across the region. All in all, while other areas of the world were witnessing successful democratization and recognition of human rights, the opposite was happening in most countries in the Arab world. As historian M. E. Yapp summarizes of the 80s and 90s, "The Near East remained a region where authoritarianism was the norm and violence was repressed with violence."¹¹⁵ This reality would continue, for the most part, up through the 21st century, and even until the recent revolutionary activities of the Arab Spring.

The dramatic changes summarized above would become refracted through the literary encounter with America via explicit and implicit renderings.

Sunallah Ibrahim

Sunallah Ibrahim (b. 1937) is one of the Arab World's most prominent and notorious contemporary authors. He came of age during the Free Officers Movement in 1952, and became politically active with the Egyptian Communists during his youth. His literary career, not surprisingly, began in prison, where he spent five years in the early 1960s. Ibrahim served time for charges of political conspiracy against Nasser's regime, during one of the regime's crackdowns on political opposition. The relationship between the Egyptian Communists and Nasser's regime was unique, since they actually shared many left-leaning beliefs, but a tenuous animosity existed due to the Communists'

¹¹⁵ Yapp, M. E.. *The Near East Since the First World War*. (London: Longman, 1996) p. 449.

ideologies falling even further to the left of government. This animosity was severely exacerbated after the 1958 coup in Iraq, whereupon Egyptian Communists became viewed as a potential internal menace antithetical to Nasser's pan-Arabism. Ibrahim's imprisonment confirms the simple fact that, "the consistent support his faction had given Nasser ended up counting for nothing."¹¹⁶

Ibrahim's dedication to political activism was transferred wholesale to literature upon release from prison. His first novel, *Tilka al-Rā'iḥa* (*That Smell*, 1966), emerged on the literary scene in 1966, and it left an indelible mark. Not only was the novel pulled from the shelves by state censors because of sexual content deemed inappropriate, but the deeper wave this work set off in literary circles was a reaction to its shockingly barebones style. This style is marked by short sentences altogether lacking description, judgment, or emotion. This form offered a clear contrast to the lush rhetorical style so commonly employed in the classical and modern literary idiom. Literary scholar Samia Mehrez credits *Tilka al-Rā'iḥa* with initiating a new literary sensibility.¹¹⁷ She justifies this claim based on Ibrahim's rejection of stylistic trends in the Arabic language, as well as the uproar this novel caused in literary circles. A rising generation of young writers took Ibrahim as a beacon of innovation, while moderate and traditional elements within the literary field berated what they saw as literary vulgarity that lacked any semblance of skill or decency.

Ibrahim has maintained his status through the years as an avant-garde novelist. While his staccato-like sentences, lacking adjectives, have become a trademark utilized

¹¹⁶ Creswell, Robin. *That Smell and Notes from Prison*. (New York: New Directions Publishing, 2013), p. 5.

¹¹⁷ Samia Mehrez, *Egyptian Writers between History and Fiction*. (New York: The American University in Cairo Press, 1994), p. 44.

in a number of his works, other experimentations in content and form have also marked his novels. Amongst these formal features is his frequent inclusion of extratextual material in his novels: official state documents abound in *Najmat Ughuṣṭus* (August Star, 1974), a novel that focuses on building the High Dam in Aswan, while the extensive use of newspaper clippings proliferates in *Bayrūt, Bayrūt* (Beirut, Beirut, 1984) and *Dhāt* (Zaat, 1992). Presenting extratextual material within his novels blurs the line between fiction and reality, creating a profound tension and ambiguity.

The content of Ibrahim's novels presents a number of continuities from one novel to the next, especially in the focus on particular themes and ideas. For example, many of his novels describe mundane aspects of his characters' everyday life, filling pages with the details of their objective reality. While human interaction with the tangible world is common focus of his description, this is frequently accompanied by Ibrahim's intellectual explorations of ideologies and their implications; consumerism, capitalism and globalization being particular concerns that emerge consistently across his works. Combining the mundane and intellectual is probably so common since Ibrahim's heroes also tend to share a number of traits, as Samia Mehrez describes, "his heroes are actors of the drama that he and other contemporary Arab writers continue to live. It is no wonder, then, that his protagonists are all writers whose works never see the light of day because they refuse to produce what is acceptable and therefore compromising."¹¹⁸

Both form and content in the work of Ibrahim underscore an author engaged with his present reality, from the miniscule details of morning coffee and newspaper - clippings from which may actually be inserted into the narrative - to the domineering

¹¹⁸ Ibid, p. 57.

political and ideological concerns of the day. *Amrīkānlī* is a novel that fits into the literary trajectory that Ibrahim had already established by the time it was published in 2003. The hero is an intellectual, but most of the narration focuses on the mundane, extratextual material weaved into the novel's narration and footnotes. All the while there is a constant reflection on politics and ideologies. The major difference is of course the novel's setting, America. Given Ibrahim's political leanings from his early days in the Communist party, and the persistent infatuation in his literature with capitalism and the effects of globalization, his literary foray into America is a charged encounter.

Amrīkānlī Summary

Amrīkānlī is a nearly five-hundred page novel that narrates the experience of an Egyptian history professor named Shukri who is invited to teach a course at a university in San Francisco. The novel takes place in the fall of 1998, as documented by detailed textual references to the events of that year, highlighted by the lurid media coverage of President Clinton's extramarital affair with Monica Lewinsky. The autobiographical aspect of this novel cannot be understated, as Sunallah Ibrahim did in fact live in the San Francisco area in the fall of 1998, where he taught a literature course at the University of California - Berkeley. During this semester he diligently recorded his impressions of America, and these notes would form the contextual base upon which *Amrīkānlī* was constructed.¹¹⁹

Amrīkānlī reads more like a journal than a novel. Within its structure, there are no powerful narrative climaxes, ordeals, or decisive moments that propel the action.

¹¹⁹ Youssef Rakha, "The Smell of Dissent", in *al-Ahram Weekly*, <http://weekly.ahram.org.eg/2003/666/cu1.htm> Nov. 27-Dec. 3 2003 Edition.

Instead the reader follows along the mundane daily interactions between Shukri and his American environment, which is primarily populated by students, colleagues and staff at the university. Much of the narration that takes place at the university consists of the details of the history class that he teaches. These details include Shukri's lectures on his own experiences, his thoughts about his students, as well as descriptions of historians, their ideas and the third-person narration of student presentations. This novel incorporates so much historical detail that it sometimes seems like you are reading a historical treatise, a feeling only intensified by the use of footnotes to provide additional detail about historians and their ideas.

Dr. Shukri's history class is organized around the concept of 'personal history' (*al-tārīkh al-shakhṣī*). What is intended by this concept is the possibility of understanding society writ large through the evaluation of a single individual's interpretation of historical events. Shukri becomes his own 'guinea pig' for this experiment in historical study, as his lectures blend stories from his own life and intellectual development with major events in Egyptian history. Through this personal history Shukri's American students, and the reader, discover how he has attempted to walk a fine line between his pursuit of historical truth and official state censure throughout his career. Many of Shukri's academic pursuits were rejected by his superiors at different times in his academic career, as they included controversial topics that threatened the interests of those in power. Hence, Dr. Shukri's personal story also doubles as a documentation of the questionable role of academic freedom in Egypt. As his personal history develops, the intellectual climate deteriorates over time, making his professional activities more precarious. This is especially the case with the conservative

religious influence of Saudi Arabia in Egypt in the 70s and 80s, a reality that only encouraged the anti-intellectual climate in Shukri's own profession. This reality overwhelms Shukri, and prior to his invitation to teach in America he endures a bout of acute depression in Egypt that is precipitated by his inability to adjust to the changes in his profession and Arab society in general. In that *Amrīkānlī*'s narrative focuses on the mundane aspects of Dr. Shukri's experience in America, much of the plot revolves around his history class, which shifts between his very personal rendition of modern Egyptian history, and the contributions of his students to the class. In a sense Shukri explores America through the contributions of his students in the classroom setting. When the narration shifts outside of the university and onto the streets of San Francisco he encounters America through a wide cast of personalities and locales.

In addition to the historical content that fills the pages of *Amrīkānlī*, the novel is very much grounded in its American setting. This grounding is achieved through the plethora of American characters that populate the novel and bring unique perspectives to the fore. Featured among these characters are Shukri's students, who come from diverse ethnic backgrounds and offer insight into the proverbial American 'melting pot.' Also featured in the novel are the staff and colleagues at the university; this group provides the perspective of Shukri's American cohort, many of whom represent the generation connected to the heady counter-culture days of San Francisco. Filling out this diverse cast are the Arab-Americans with whom he interacts. This wide cast of characters forms a truly diverse American pastiche. It is Shukri's experiences and conversations with this wide cast of Americans that create a spectrum of events that constitute his American encounter; be it Thanksgiving at a student's house, a car ride with a homosexual

acquaintance, or a visit to the affluent suburban home of his Egyptian-American colleague Mahir.

This spectrum of American voices introduces the reader to a diverse American cast that is further complemented by Dr. Shukri's urban explorations of San Francisco. From the Japanese Tea Garden in Golden Gate Park, to the red light district, and forays into poverty-stricken neighborhoods, *Amrīkānlī* navigates through San Francisco with a particular focus on its immigrant neighborhoods. The connection between Raḍwa ʿĀshūr's affinities with American minorities in *al-Rihla* and Sunallah Ibrahim's focus on minority voices is a strong link between two texts on the American encounter. The clear narrative attention devoted to minority voices and marginalized neighborhoods in *Amrīkānlī* opens the American encounter in Arabic to new perspectives.

Interconnected Themes in *Amīkānlī*

The interconnectivity between the prominent themes in *Amrīkānlī* is a feature of the novel that must be considered prior to any discussion of discrete themes and motifs. The novel's focus on history is the core to this interconnectivity, as the protagonist's personal history is weaved into Egyptian history, and likewise the student's voices become reflections of America's historical and contemporary consciousness. In addition, the protagonist's diligent recording of impressions of San Francisco and its people link the individual and the particular with national and global concerns that factor into this encounter with America. America's status as the world's most powerful nation, casting influence over distant lands, like Egypt, is always part of the intricate transnational equation undergirding this novel.

The level of interconnectivity between America and the Arab world, in combination with the individual's behavior with broader cultural and historical trends, is best laid bare through a simple scene in *Amrīkānlī*. The scene in question occurs towards the end of the novel, which naturally coincides with the last few classes of Professor Shukri's course. Shukri is in the middle of a classroom lecture, and is narrating the events surrounding his own mental breakdown in the early 1990's, and his diagnosis of acute depression. After leaving his doctor's office, where he was prescribed Prozac, he and a friend head to a McDonalds in Cairo. Sitting there, eating food he describes as tasteless, he becomes fixated on the other customers in the McDonalds. There is girl in her early twenties in a sleeveless shirt sitting with her mother, who is wearing a hijab. This young girl must be on the 'marriage market' he remembers thinking at the time, and her hair will be covered like her mother as soon as she is married. Another family he describes is comprised of a fat father and two obese children eating ice cream. He leaves McDonalds and heads to a relative's house, where his female relative, of the same age, makes him wait at the door while she covers herself fully. Inside he listens to her complain about her husband who works in Saudi Arabia. The husband is extremely unhappy there, but she is imploring him to stay and work because their son wants a mobile phone.

This scene, like many in *Amrīkānlī*, filters these mundane events through Shukri's distinctive interests, blending and blurring the lines between individual and communal, even East and West. Sunallah Ibrahim's literary skill is on display in how he compiles this series of mundane details regarding Shukri's trip from the doctor's office to his relative's house, with a stop at McDonalds in between, so as to evoke so many salient

cultural and transcultural issues. For example, Americanization is evoked in the setting, in McDonalds being the most iconic American eatery, its presence in Egypt emphasizing its global reach. American influence is also represented through fetishized consumerism, here linked to the desire for a mobile phone superseding the father's return from unpleasant working conditions in Saudi Arabia, which represents the intense lure of technology produced by the global capitalist markets. Sustaining this consumerist impulse comes with a severe price, that being a broken family, as the father unhappily toils in Saudi. The obesity of the Egyptian children in McDonald's cannot be considered in isolation, since *Amrīkāli* is filled with Shukri's observation of obese Americans as he walks San Francisco's streets, hence these Egyptians are inextricably linked to obesity as a phenomenon most prominent in his American experience. This scene also references social and religious shifts in Egyptian society through the women who are described. On the one hand you have the young girl whose sleeveless shirt indicates her marital status as single, and Shukri can already envision her covering up once married. On the other hand, there is his aunt, and the sense of frustration he feels in waiting for her to cover while he waits at the door belies the fact that this is a recent phenomenon, indicative of how public and private manifestations of religiosity are increasing even within his own family. Saudi Arabia, a catalyst for this new religiosity in Egypt, not surprisingly makes an appearance in this scene, marking a significant historical development in the Middle East. The migration of Egyptians to Saudi Arabia has not only had an impact on public religious appearances, but it disturbs the unity of the family, and the influx of capital increases consumerist impulses. The entire sequence detailed here covers less than a page, but with seemingly innocuous descriptions Sunallah Ibrahim evokes a series of intricate

connections between each snapshot and their social and cultural implications. On top of all this we must remember that these descriptions are part of his classroom lecture, reifying this mundane scene as a historical event representative of a particular time. Previous lectures discussed the influence of Saudi Arabia and the increase in religiosity in Egyptian society, and this scene helps to paint a concrete picture of the historical shifts he had previously explicated.

At first glance, this McDonalds scene is simply a series of casual experiences and observations made at a particularly poignant and emotional time in the protagonist's life. Reading beneath the surface, the scene transforms into a historical event rife with connections to shifting perspectives on Americanization, Egyptian society, the practice of religious ethics, global capitalist trends, and other complexities. This scene exemplifies the historical consciousness that frames *Amrīkānlī*, especially in the use of personal history as a guide to engage the readers' attention throughout the novel. In presenting the personal as the historical, the novel recognizes history in its signification as a series of past events, but also as the constant march of the present, through the lives that shape it. *Amrīkānlī* is therefore very conscious of itself as a transnational historical document which itself is infused with all the interconnectivity that a person, place, or event can contain at any given moment.

Professor Shukri: Between Egypt and America

The construction of *Amrīkānlī*'s protagonist, Professor Shukri, is a process that alternates constantly between past and present. This process is realized through Shukri's detailed reflections on his personal history interspersed with musings from the

contemporaneous reality of his American experience. In borrowing a metaphor from Susan Freidman's book *Mappings* (1998), these dual sources of his character reflect an important dynamic of subject formation when abroad, where Professor Shukri's personal history presents his *roots*, and connections to his origins, while the musing of his contemporaneous reality reflect his *routes*, and the experiences that mark difference and displacement.¹²⁰ While much of his personal history in Egypt is not essential to understanding his encounter with America, this background does offer an explanatory source for his motivations, desires, and *rootedness*. The historical background also opens the text to linkages and comparisons between America and his native Egypt. The narrative focus on Shukri's intellectual journey in Egypt and America demonstrates, more than the other works on the American encounter, how the American encounter activates a deep reflection on home and self.

The connection between Shukri's Egyptian roots and his American encounter is deepened by the personal politics of his life history. Much of Shukri's personal narration focuses on his pursuit of historical truth during his professional career, a trajectory that inevitably leads to confrontations with power structures in the Egyptian academy and government. This stifling reality is contrasted with the freedom of expression he enjoys in America. Shukri's freedom and distance from home permit his honesty in narrating his story to his history class in the novel. His honest story reveals his disappointment with Egypt's state-controlled university system and the anti-intellectual climate, as well as his alignment with opposition historians and thinkers. Honesty also leads to his frank discussion of the impact of sexual experiences to his intellectual development in his

¹²⁰ Freidman, Susan Stanford. *Mappings; Feminism and the Cultural Geographies of Encounter*. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998). Friedman explores these two poles of rootedness and 'routedness' in the construction of subjectivity and identity in chapter six of this book, p. 151-178.

history class, taboo subjects in an Egyptian university setting. In speaking engagements outside of his classroom while in America he discusses controversial details of the Egyptian state's cooption of intellectuals. It is clear that Shukri's presence in America allows him a comfortable distance from which he chooses to elaborate on his criticisms of Egypt. Understood from this perspective, his displacement in America *enables* his honest depictions of Egyptian life and history, ranging from sensitive personal problems to larger historical events and developments in the Arab world. Professor Shukri's very presence in America saturates the text with a layer of ambivalence, in that his truthful reflections on Egypt and world affairs are directly linked to his dislocation in America and the freedom that this distance, both geographical and mental, affords him.

The rootedness that forms the foundation of his subjectivity can be demonstrated through some poignant moments drawn from Professor Shukri's life. One such moment revolves around his explanation of how he became a historian. As any good historian would do, he begins by offering the context of this foundational moment in his life, referencing 1956, and the tripartite international aggression towards Egypt precipitated by Nasser's nationalization of the Suez Canal. While this historical moment laid the temporal frame, the Suez Crisis was merely the backdrop to a much more personal interaction. Shukri had been a lackadaisical university student up until the semester coinciding with the Suez Crisis, when a female teaching assistant named Rajā⁹ became the instructor of the history course in which he was enrolled. Rajā⁹ was the first female teaching assistant at the university. He developed an intense physical attraction to her. This initial attraction evolved into a profound respect for her historical approach, which challenged the post-revolutionary ethos within the history department; this ethos

selectively presented Egyptian history simply as a series of events culminating in the '52 Revolution. As Shukri claims, in repeating what he learned from Rajā³, this official methodology “leaves a student without a frame by which to understand his modern constitution” [*Amrīkānlī*, p. 101].¹²¹ Rajā³ encouraged Shukri’s historical curiosity and her example kindled his desire to challenge canonical understandings of historical events. His first research paper centered on the female Pharaoh Hatshepsut, where Shukri brazenly challenged the views of the famous Egyptologist Salīm Ḥasan regarding Hatshepsut’s powerful reign.

This transformative moment in the text reveals Shukri’s rootedness to his nation in unique ways. The kinetic core that inspires Shukri’s interest in his nation’s history is his physical and intellectual attraction to Rajā³, herself a representative of the revolutionary new Egypt as the first female teaching assistant. Shukri’s intense attraction to her energizes his interest in his nation, its history, and the powerful role of historical truth. This confluence of emotion and intellectual transformation is set in midst of a weighty historical event itself, the 1956 Suez crisis, and Shukri interprets this moment of ecstatic national pride as encouraging an intellectual opening towards an honest reconciliation with the nation’s past. He binds himself to this optimistic perspective in spite of the history department’s efforts to limit historical study exclusively to past glories. As a young, impressionable Egyptian this moment of personal and national significance is seared into Shukri’s memory. The confluence of national pride, gender equality, and historical truth would fundamentally inform his emerging identity. This moment comes to define his life, tying him to Egypt’s past and present, and also tying

¹²¹ Ibrahim, Sunallah. *Amrīkānlī*, (Cairo: Dār al-Mustaqbal al-‘Arabī, 2003), pg. 101. My translations.

him to universalist causes in support of achieving equality and seeking truth. Shukri's professional career is grounded in an effort to implement the vision of the nation through historical revisionism that Rajā' inspired, since she is the symbolic catalyst that reflects the strong feminine Egyptian past of Hatshepsut, as well as the projection of a progressive Egyptian nation he strives to implement as an historian.

The trials and tribulations that follow in Shukri's personal life and professional career are largely a result of his fight to maintain his progressive and critical nationalist vision against opposing forces in society, such as the increasingly anti-intellectual climate that emerges through the Arab world in the 1970s and 1980s. As he relates, at the outset of the 1970s he was still in the army when his father and President Nasser died at the same time, devastating blows both personally and intellectually, two deaths symbolically unified as a singular cataclysmic event. The devastation of the death of his father-figure was softened through a transference from his father and Nasser to Ṭaha Ḥusayn, as these deaths coincide with his insatiable reading of Ṭaha Ḥusayn's *Fī al-Shi'ṛ al-Jāhili*, in which Ḥusayn details his robust anti-canonical ideas. It is significant that Shukri's new model, or father-figure, despite his wide reading of theorists and historians from the West, is Egypt's native son, reinforcing his national pride. Encouraged by the examples of Rajā' and Ṭaha Ḥusayn, Shukri's own work explores controversial topics in revisionist history, including a book reassessing the Islamicization of Egypt following the Arab conquests. Shukri experiences a series of rejections of his academic work. Not only is his work rejected, but Sunallah Ibrahim chooses to write his protagonist into the pantheon of iconic academics and literary men whose lives were threatened because of their ideas. Shukri receives a threatening phone call after his book is published, a call which is

likened in the novel to calls reportedly received by Naguib Mahfouz and Farag Fawda prior to assassination attempts. Yet, despite threats on his life, suffering from depression, and offers to stay in America or teach in Europe, Shukri is resolute in his desire to live and work in Egypt. Understanding the difficulties he faces living and working in Egypt only reinforces the potency of his desire to stay and remain rooted.

An important aspect of Shukri's rootedness and commitment to home is his character's acceptance of his strained relationship with his homeland. This acceptance is part and parcel of his everyday life in Egypt, where he cautiously practices his craft while confronting state and society through the pursuit of historical truth. During his semester in America, this relationship with home is revealed in unexpected ways. For instance, early in his stay in America he comments, "my post- nap tea was the same brand I prefer in Cairo, but with a different taste that I didn't like. I must have gotten used to the Egyptian-made kind that was produced locally and contained lots of dirt" [*Amrīkānlī*, p. 20]. His preference of tea is playfully representative of his strained relationship with home while abroad, as he consciously mocks his own preference for the blemishes associated with home. As the narrative shifts back and forth between Shukri's personal history and his presence in America, comments like these begin to form a fuller picture of his simultaneous connectivity and detachment from home. The fact is, Shukri's personal history already reveals a complex subjectivity in ideological conflict within the Egyptian homeland that he loves, so his geographic and intellectual distance from Egypt exposes new attachments to home while intensifying detachments.

A crucial difference between *Amrīkānlī* and other texts on the American encounter is the composition of the protagonist, Professor Shukri. Most texts place Arab

subjectivities in America during their youth, hence incorporating the American encounter into a broader *Bildungsroman* of sorts. Professor Shukri, on the other hand, is likely in his sixties when in America, given the timeline of his personal history, and therefore his encounter is less developmental and more focused on his observer status. For Shukri, America is already a known entity through his extensive readings in history. His observations and reactions therefore indicate his deep ambivalence to what he already knows of America, in addition to what he witnesses and experiences living there. While many of these experiences will be analyzed later in this chapter, a few should suffice to give a sense of Shukri's displaced subjectivity ambivalently observing his American environment.

Shukri's ambivalence towards America is formed throughout the text by cycles of positive and negative observations and experiences in America. He stays relatively objective in relaying these experiences, as they take the form of mundane descriptions common to Ibrāhīm's writing style, but it is not difficult to read between the lines and discover the subtleties and hidden emotion lurking behind his observations. On the negative side, he comments on the loneliness of individualistic American life, the impersonal automatization therein, as well as the overwhelming consumerism and obesity. These comments are delivered with comparisons to home as either implicit or explicit subtext. For example, early in his stay in San Francisco he accidentally burns a chicken he is roasting in the oven, resulting in a cacophony of fire alarms and smoke. As Shukri calls the caretaker to ask how to deal with the situation he expresses confusion that the noise and smoke didn't draw a crowd of neighbors, since he resides in a multi-unit building. His expectation that such a scene would draw onlookers is clearly a

misplaced expectation from home that draws a stark contrast between Egypt and America. The privacy and loneliness of American life are implicitly referenced by Shukri's confusion and desperation in this scene, and these aspects of American life are unnerving to him.

Another disorienting experience takes place at a San Francisco bank, where Shukri's aims to deposit a check. Not only does he have difficulty locating a person to help him, but once he does, he is informed by this employee that all transactions have been automated, eliminating the need for human interaction. Confusion certainly marks this scene much like the burnt chicken, but here highlighting the ever-impersonal trajectory of American life. This scene, in focusing on the alienation inherent in technological automatization and mechanization of American life revisits themes present as early as the *Mahjar*, where this was likewise the major issue in *Sa'at al-Kūkū*. The negative reaction implicit to Shukri's altercation at the bank is complicated by an explicit comparison to Egypt only pages later. In chatting with a student just after this incident, Shukri relates:

I'll never forget that once I wanted something from a bank in Egypt and it took four visits over the course of a week. The first time the computer was broken, and the second time the employee was out, one the third visit he was in, but the printer broke down, and the fourth time the right employee was there, the computer and printer were fine, but the assessor was out. [*Amrikānlī*, p. 438]

This comparison to Egypt only intensifies Shukri's ambivalence to both home and America by highlighting problems endemic to each system. *Amrikānlī* seems to anticipate the fact that a reader could understand Shukri's criticisms of the American banking system as a glorification of Egypt, and therefore the protagonist squashes this possibility by pointing out flaws in each. Ambivalence marks Shukri's stance whether

home or abroad, as his experiences are marked by a sense of confusion and objective distancing, effectively freeing Shukri from the political implications of his descriptions, and inviting the reader to form her own judgments of these contrastive scenes.

While Shukri's is keen on concealing criticism of America within his character's confused reactions, his praise of elements of his American encounter is delivered without any such mystification. In *Amrīkānlī* praise is primarily reserved for the freedoms he enjoys in America. In fact when asked point blank by a student about his impressions of American life, he simply answers, "I enjoy expressing myself freely" [*Amrīkānlī*, p. 383]. This response is simple, but quite profound, since his personal history has already revealed how the lack of freedom of expression in Egypt is the source of his anxiety and even threatens his livelihood. Given how profound a feeling it is to experience this freedom, it is not surprising that his admiration for America branches out from this nucleus. *Amrīkānlī* is filled with concrete examples of freedom of expression that Shukri admires. For example, his attention is drawn to satirical newspapers that ridicule the United States government and religious groups. His admiration for freedom of expression is also witnessed in the attention he pays to the gay community in San Francisco, whether it is just observing and recording their interaction in public, or highlighting stories he reads in the newspaper for the reader, like his detailed retelling of the Matthew Shepard tragedy.¹²² The depth of his admiration of freedom of expression is distilled in a scene where Shukri stops in front of the student activities bulletin board at the university. He enumerates some of the activities being promoted, which include groups dedicated to various ethnic minorities, advocates against nuclear proliferation,

¹²² In October of 1998, Matthew Shepard was beaten to death in Wyoming. The subsequent trial revealed that his murderers attacked him because he was gay, resulting in new legislation on hate crimes.

environmentalist groups, friends of Palestine, civil rights advocates, gay rights advocates, etc. Shukri's mind immediately flashes to Cairo University, recalling the equivalent bulletin board near the main entrance of the university, which was always surrounded by an armed state security force and filled solely with flyers announcing lectures by state officials. Sunallah Ibrahim, through his protagonist, casually describes the Egyptian equivalent, but the incredible disparity between these two bulletin boards evokes deep criticism. The bulletin board in America is a symbol of freedom, choice, and diversity, whereas in Egypt it is a site of fear, state control, and limitations.

In America Shukri is finally at ease with his intellectual pursuits and professional position but estranged from his social and cultural surroundings. In his native Egypt this situation is largely reversed. Shukri is bound to his roots, but lacks nostalgia. He is intellectually comfortable in his '*route*' through San Francisco, but has little admiration for this place. Shukri's ambivalence in both locales is his defining characteristic, and it reveals an Arab subjectivity that does not seek self-empowerment through judging and resisting the American other, as was the case in *New York 80* and *al-Rihla*. He stands as a character whose sense of self internalizes difference and ambiguity through his bicultural experiences and observations.

A Polyphony of American Voices

In the previous texts analyzed, especially *New York 80* and *al-Rihla*, the American encounter is primarily filtered through the protagonist's perceptions and reactions, as a singular subjectivity dominates. In *New York 80* this took the form of an epic ideological confrontation between two fictionalized representatives of their cultures. In *al-Rihla*

Raḍwa ʿĀshūr not only offered assessments of America, but carved out her own unique America for her reader. *Amrīkānlī* deviates from this concentration on a singular subjectivity by ceding a great deal of narrative authority to secondary characters. This is a significant shift in form that opens the text to the multiplicity of perspectives. Most of these characters are in fact Americans, and therefore, the novel allows American students, staff members, and Shukri's other acquaintances to offer their own personal stories, effectively narrating their nation. These American voices add important perspectives to this novel, producing a polyphonic narrative that incorporates a variety of individuated viewpoints. Ceding narrative authority to a variety of characters is, of course, a choice made by the text's author, Sunallah Ibrahim. This fact alone demands the reader's attentiveness towards the author's management of these particular American voices. Why *these* voices? What exactly do these voices contribute to the encounter?

The students in Shukri's class count for a significant portion of the secondary voices in this narrative. This collection of students contains a variety of national and ethnic origins, a point belabored by Professor Shukri nearly every time he discusses a particular student. Among this group, there are students with Native American, African American, Japanese American, Brazilian, and Egyptian origins. Shukri's fascination with origins brings into relief the multi-ethnic American experience, while also situating each student in a narrative that helps explain their [hi]story. After all, his course focuses on personal history, and each student of a unique ethnic origin shares a perspective that reflects the struggle of their ethnic group to fit into the diverse American landscape. Considering the protagonist's fixation with students' multi-ethnic origins, *Amrīkānlī*

clearly chooses to explore America from its margins, especially in highlighting the challenges of its minorities to fit into the larger national narrative.

Meghan is one of Shukri's students whose physical features indicate her East Asian ethnic origins. When Shukri begins to inquire about her background, she informs him that her father is Japanese American, but he was not born in Japan, rather, he was born in an internment camp in the United States. This peculiar fact sparks Shukri's curiosity, as he then informs the reader, "I gradually pried the details from her" [*Amrīkānlī*, p. 191]. Meghan describes the horrible conditions in the internment camps established for Japanese Americans during World War II, delivering an expose on the mistreatment of Japanese Americans in America. Included in this summary are some of the details of the then Californian public prosecutor Earl Warren's involvement in this humiliating episode in American history. Meghan is somewhat reticent to reveal these details, accentuating the sensitive nature of her family's story, upsetting her even though she is a generation removed.

Meghan's input is exemplary in illustrating how ceding narrative authority to secondary voices is one of *Amrīkānlī*'s effective narrative strategies in shaping the encounter with America. Firstly, the point of entry into her story is through ethnicity, ethnic difference to be exact, reinforcing the text's interest in the origins of American minorities. Interest in ethnic minorities was a strategy present in *al-Rihla* as well, but the difference here is that all of *Amrīkānlī*'s voices are American, and not foreign students from abroad. The inclusion of Meghan's story, as well as other American students from minority backgrounds, reveals *Amrīkānlī*'s concern for how different ethnic minorities have struggled to establish themselves in an American landscape dominated by

Americans from predominantly European origins. This exploration of minorities' stories, and Meghan's account in particular, highlights the painful, even shameful, episodes of American history. Hence a textual effort emerges that looks to understand America from its margins; Meghan represents one of these many voices emerging from a history infused with repression. The unique power of Meghan's story comes from her reticent narration of her father's experience in an internment camp. At times her boyfriend must step in to complete aspects of the story, as Meghan appears to be still haunted by how her father's loyalty to America was questioned. Meghan's emotional scars still clearly exist, and a subtle connection emerges between Shukri's own troubled relationship to Egypt and Meghan's to America.

By personalizing this story through Meghan's narration, this historical event shifts from the margins to the center of the American encounter in *Amrīkānlī*. The injustice and violence that is part of understanding American diversity is brought to the forefront. In presenting America to Arab readers through the individual voices of American characters, Sunallah Ibrahim purposely focuses on controversial aspects of America's social and historical past. And Meghan's voice is not the only voice that enters the narration to focus on historical injustices. A Native-American student named Sabak also provides historical and contemporary examples of oppression directed at minorities. Sabak's perspective is revealed through a letter he writes refusing an invitation to a fellow student's Thanksgiving celebration. In this letter he details the horrors that this holiday evokes for his people [*Amrīkānlī*, p. 387]. On the one hand, this strategy of voicing minority stories is educational in exposing lesser-known events from America's history for an Arab reader, but on a deeper level it emphasizes the novel's broader focus

on injustice and suffering as a transnational concern. Meghan's family story of internment develops an equivalence of sorts, between the official state discrimination Meghan's father experienced in America as part of a defined group and the singling out and imprisonment of political or religious groups in Egypt. *Amrīkānlī* demonstrates that state repression in the 20th century is indeed a transnational problem, certainly not unique to a politically repressive state like Egypt, but present in the world's democracies as well.

Amrīkānlī also cedes narrative authority to Americans whose voices represent the ethnic majority. These voices compliment those of America's ethnic minorities in exposing different forms of oppression in American society. In a meeting outside of class, one of Shukri's female students named Charly tells him a story about her father's predicament. Her father owned a successful architecture firm when she was a child, and just when he was beginning an expansion of his business, a massive design conglomerate tried to buy him out in an attempt to eliminate competition. After refusing the offer, her father's business immediately began losing contracts, and was forced into bankruptcy, eventually being bought by this same corporate giant that drove them out of business. Her father was so devastated by this debacle that he lost his ability to speak and could no longer work, forcing the family to survive on her mother's teaching salary. Charly's narration personalizes the devastating affects of corporate greed, providing yet another depressing tale from America. Since ethnicity is a prism through which Shukri's subjectivity frequently assesses his environment, Charly's lack of minority ethnic status, but possession of devastating story of her own, reveal the multiple forms of oppression voiced in *Amrīkānlī*.

The only other student in Shukri's class that does not have ties to an ethnic minority, Larry, not coincidentally, also shares a troublesome story about his intellectual pursuits. Larry is very much the American doppelganger of a young Professor Shukri. Larry is pursuing a PhD in History, with the intent of working on Israel's New Historians. His similarities with Shukri not only pertain to their field of study, but like Shukri's experience in the Egyptian academy, Larry's project is repeatedly rejected in American academic circles due to sensitive political content that challenges America's close relationship with Israel. Larry's story, combined with that of Charly's family, continues to produce instances of shared repression and suffering, further enhancing the novel's projection of transnational oppressions.

It is clear that the American voices are crucial conduits by which *Amrīkānī* chooses to represent America. Sunallah Ibrahim is not satisfied presenting an American encounter that emanates from a sole Arab subjectivity, but incorporates individuated American voices to add nuance in representing America. The voices that he chooses demonstrate the tremendous ethnic diversity of America, which helps convey a sense of diversity likely unfamiliar to an Arab reader. Perhaps more importantly, the voices chosen, whether embodied by ethnic minorities or otherwise, vocalize unique but relatable tales of struggle. The overwhelming focus here is not the rich and famous living the storied American dream, but the marginalized dealing with the rigors of assimilation and the challenges of racism, capitalism and political bias.

The Geographical Encounter with America

The narration of place within *Amrīkānlī* is a feature of the novel that frequently blends quietly into the narrative. This is the case due to circumstance, since the narrative's concentration on Shukri's personal history and his discussions with students and colleagues normally take place in the non-descript and enclosed space of the classroom or office. Ideas, voices and personalities are allowed to thrive in such an enclosed environment. Given the spatial insularity of much of the narrative, Shukri's explorations of San Francisco are liberating. A useful symbiosis emerges between the diversity of his students and his explorations of an equally diverse city. There is also a symbiosis between the novel's ceding of narrative authority to a diverse cast of voices, as previously discussed, and the manner in which Shukri's explorations of San Francisco are realized; Shukri's explorations are actually accompanied by American acquaintances who impart rich personal context to the locales. A second similarity is that these explorations demonstrate a clear focus on marginalized, even dangerous, places in San Francisco, introducing the Arab reader to lesser-known American urban locales.

Relatively early in Professor Shukri's semester in San Francisco he visits the Japanese Tea Garden at the Golden Gate Park. During this visit he meets by chance an employee from his department at the university, Mrs. Shadwick, a friendly woman around his age. They engage in small talk about the department, the park, and other tourist attractions. When Mrs. Shadwick recommends that he visit the Academy of Sciences Museum inside the park Shukri replies that he generally feels a sense of suffocation in museums, and this response initiates an exciting new trajectory for the afternoon. Mrs. Shadwick smiles in agreement with his assessment of museums, and

asks him, “Do you have any obligations? I’ll take you to an historic area more enriching than a thousand museums” [*Amrīkānlī*, p. 143]. Mrs. Shadwick proceeds to take Shukri on a personal history tour of San Francisco centered around nodal points of the Bay Area’s revolutionary heyday in the 1960s. For example, they visit a park where Mrs. Shadwick and fellow protestors staged a sit-in with the intent of returning public land to Native Americans. They visit areas around Berkeley where she details all sorts of stories about the diverse peoples and causes that she supported; groups ranging from Hippies to Black Panthers and the causes ranging from burning draft cards, to protests in support of liberating women from the bra [*Amrīkānlī*, p. 145-146]. They park Mrs. Shadwick’s car and continue the tour on foot in a dangerous area of San Francisco around 6th street. Shukri notices the graffiti on the walls, and the dilapidated structures that still show the affects of earthquakes. He also notes the aural shift to Latin music, which matches the ethnic shift of the local population of Mexicans and Central Americans. As Mrs. Shadwick describes the area, he realizes that he is walking in the same neighborhood an Egyptian colleague at the university explicitly warned him to avoid because of the danger. The adventure comes to close as Shukri and Mrs. Shadwick attend a meeting of a leftist group she participates in, where discussions include the affects of U.S. sanctions on Sudan and violence in Iraq.

Shukri’s journey with Mrs. Shadwick engages with place in an active and symbolic way. Firstly, the shift from the Japanese Tea Garden, a shrine of bourgeois culture, to the dangerous 6th street area is a harrowing transition. There is an intentionality behind this shift, made clear in Mrs. Shadwick’s statement that she will ‘take him to historic place(s) a thousands times more enriching than a museum.’ In

showing him these places of protest followed by economically depressed neighborhoods, her 'museum' is a combination of historical counter-culture and a lived reality of the American poor that does not have a presence in high culture. Her tour is a means of focusing on protests of the past, as well as the distressing realities of the present, which sublimates them into their own significant artifacts worthy of inclusion in a museum.

The fact that Mrs. Shadwick guides Shukri through these memories and into these neighborhoods is also crucial to the production of the scene. This personalizes the journey through Mrs. Shadwick's experience, as the narration again cedes authority to yet another American. Mrs. Shadwick details a particular history of the city's liberal decades, a movement still alive, as evinced by the leftist meeting that concludes the trip. Mrs. Shadwick is not only Shukri's contemporary, but her focus on leftist politics are values that Shukri shares, hence her particular perspective in exploring the city is a story that Shukri wants to hear. This episode with Mrs. Shadwick also creates a comparative dissonance between the progressive activities that she has been involved with for decades and the struggles he has faced through his personal stories of thwarted intellectual activism in Egypt, where he has been still striving for acceptance of the most basic right to express his ideas freely. Again, this dissonance is subtlety laid into the structure of the novel through his neutral observances during this journey with Mrs. Shadwick. From the perspective of comparative personal histories, Mrs. Shadwick steps into the narration to present an America full of potential, but also still struggling against power structures in many different ways.

A crucial aspect of Shukri's guided tour through San Francisco's leftist cultural landscape is his concomitant fixation on the squalor and danger of some of the

neighborhoods they visit. As they walk down 6th Street towards the meeting Shukri recalls his colleague's warning about visiting this area, which certainly intensifies Shukri's encounter. The subtext of this visit is filled with an excitement and trepidation over defying the warning and exploring the dangerous and marginalized neighborhood. Mrs. Shadwick casually explains how the neighborhood is populated by drug addicts, prostitutes, and the homeless, confirming the warning Shukri received. While Shukri is silent in following Mrs. Shadwick, simply observing his surroundings, his silence speaks to his acceptance, and perhaps interest, in visiting these dangerous, apparently off-limit, areas. Much like the narrative's ability to present multiple voices, this excursion into particular layers of America's urban fabric feature this diverse and dangerous neighborhood, effectively expanding the understanding of a heterogeneous America.

The model constructed in Shukri's urban adventure with Mrs. Shadwick is repeated throughout *Amrīkānlī*. By model, I'm referring to the fact that on two other occasions Shukri takes guided tours of dodgy neighborhoods revealing a side of America far removed from the San Francisco's bourgeois delights. Shukri's willingness to undertake these adventures is made clear by their repetition. These adventures mesh with his broader concerns as an historian in search of truth, reflected here by his interest in getting closer to a more holistic understanding of his urban environment beyond the university walls. His guides oblige, and introduce him to the rough edges of the American urban landscape, providing him with details of places and inhabitants. These episodes are a fitting complement to a novel keen on presenting a nuanced reading of America as a people and geography.

Shukri's second such excursion takes place on a random rainy day in the middle of the academic semester. Mrs. Shadwick spots him observing a protest and she offers him a ride home. As Shukri begins to ask questions about the protesters and the number of homeless, the ride home quickly evolves into an exposé on the homelessness epidemic in America. Mrs. Shadwick has all sorts of detailed information at her fingertips regarding the causes of homelessness in America informing Shukri about the realities of mental illness, drug addiction and unemployment that lead to such an end. Particularly disturbing to Shukri are the numbers of youth among the homeless, and Mrs. Shadwick is quick to explain this horrifying phenomenon, even exclaiming, "foreigners don't know that half the American population spends seventy percent of their income on housing that they don't own, and therefore they could easily lose!" [*Amrikānlī*, p. 248]. In answering his inquiries and showing him these realities up close, Mrs. Shadwick introduces Shukri – and the Arab reader – to a devastating side of the American socio-economic reality.

Mrs. Shadwick not only takes Shukri to neighborhoods that demonstrate dire conditions but she personalizes their trip by pointing out faces in the crowd of homeless and addicts. There is a former university employee she points out, explaining how he lost his job when the economy turned, and this led to him losing his home, and his subsequent fall into crime, addiction and homelessness. Even more devastating is a younger woman they come across at the end of their car ride. Mrs. Shadwick points out to Shukri her many bracelets, worn to hide traces of needle marks on her arms. Mrs. Shadwick continues with many of the intimate details of this girl's life, including her visits home, her particular addictions, and criminal activities. Shukri, confused by this intimate knowledge, unaware if Mrs. Shadwick is narrating a hypothetical series of events or this

girl's lived reality, asks Mrs. Shadwick how she knows all of these details. Her response is, "She's my daughter" [*Amrīkānlī*, p. 250]. With this terse sentence the chapter ends. The emotional reverberations of Mrs. Shadwick's admission produce a rare narrative climax in a novel that holds few such moments. All of Mrs. Shadwick's knowledge about the realities of homelessness, addiction, and crime are cast in relief to this torturous personal experience she has endured with her own daughter. The emotional drama is especially poignant in that Mrs. Shadwick has become a confidant of Shukri's, as the two share many values, and she has been a conduit to his meaningful explorations of a gritty side of America. This scene not only continues the educational work so common to the American encounter in Arabic literature, but personalizes it through an American character, urging an empathy for Mrs. Shadwick's tragic experiences.

The final urban exploration takes place with a new guide at the helm. Fitz is the caretaker of the professor's apartment that Shukri is renting, and one afternoon they venture into the city, with Fitz having promised Shukri that he would introduce him to the so-called 'real' America. This trip is centered around two famous areas of San Francisco, the Tenderloin and the Castro districts. As Fitz guides Shukri through the areas, the visual landscape dominates their conversation and Shukri's observations. The Tenderloin is full of massage parlors, storefronts advertising cheap products, and everywhere he looks the windows are barred. The population is predominantly composed of Vietnamese, Cambodian and Laotian immigrants. As Fitz wryly quips, "these immigrants have been saved from wars to live the rest of their years in fear" [*Amrīkānlī*, p. 266]. Their fear is resultant of the danger present in the area, as the landscape is also populated by prostitutes, drug dealers, and other criminal elements. Fitz

draws Shukri's attention to a transvestite, and Shukri thinks to himself, "this gulp of information was more than I could comprehend, bigger than any life experience" [*Amrīkānālī*, p. 267]. The confounding journey with Fitz would continue into the Castro, where they stopped at a café for a drink. Shukri is again overwhelmed, this time in observing the gay male population up close. Fitz, for his part, explains anything and everything, telling Shukri about bondage, S&M, and other behaviors within the heterosexual and homosexual community. At one point Shukri becomes entranced by a male couple at the café, observing their every move.

During this trip with Fitz the calm demeanor that Shukri has cultivated as an observer of American society is tested. At various moment in this particular trip he expresses feelings of anxiety and fear. He describes the feelings that plague him as *ghāmiḍ*, meaning ambiguous or uncertain. Unlike his trips with Mrs. Shadwick that drew him closer to areas of poverty and addiction to which he could relate, Fitz's journey draws him into uncharted experience, and the total unfamiliarity inspires a sense of fear. What is interesting is that Shukri maintains his impartiality and does not judge his unfamiliar surroundings. Rather, he learns about them from his observations and from his American guide Fitz. Shukri's encounter with marginalized and ostracized American locales and populations graphically exposes unfamiliar peoples and places to an Arab audience with a level of objectivity that humanizes and normalizes groups often stigmatized in the Arab world at large.

Between the diverse cast of characters and the exploration of the American urban underbelly *Amrīkānālī* projects a new America to an Arab audience through Shukri's tempered narration. Unlike *al-Rihla*, where geography and people were processed

through Raḍwa's subjectivity to personalize 'her' America, Shukri is willfully guided into unfamiliar territory, laying bare diverse perspectives and geographies. In addition, unlike the ideology and forceful projection of self that animated post-67 texts, *Amrīkānālī* is decidedly less political or confrontational, a fact made clear by Shukri's observer status. Of course, it is the author's choice of voices and landscapes that can be read as a political act itself, and Sunallah Ibrahim incorporates voices and geographies that speak for the marginalized, the oppressed, and the misfortunate. Their stories and neighborhoods are elevated in the America that he chooses to represent, undercutting perceptions of American power, wealth and privilege so common to the outside world. Mrs. Shadwick says it best in one of her explanation of homelessness to Shukri, exclaiming, "foreigners just don't know!" Well, now they do.

Arab American Voices and Double Identity

Included among the many voices that *Amrīkānālī* features are Arab American voices. These Arab American characters showcase the struggle over identity that this minority faces in negotiating the Arab, and the American, aspects of their double identity. Borrowed from anthropology, double identity conceptualizes the process of identification as a dynamic construct that is especially dynamic among recent immigrants negotiating between a sense of belonging to their new American culture and their ties to the old homeland.¹²³ In Shukri's American encounter he not only engages with individuals involved in this internal struggle, like his colleague Mahir and his family, but he also interacts with broader segments of this Arab American population, specifically when he

¹²³ El-Aswad, el-Sayed, "The Dynamics of Identity Reconstruction among the Arab Communities in the United States," *Anthropos*, Bd. 101, H. 1. (2006), p. 113.

delivers a lecture to the Egyptian American community in San Francisco. Each encounter reveals an individual or collective precariously negotiating the multiple identifications. The inclusion of Egyptian Americans in *Amrīkānlī* shares a thematic bond with the past, reminding us of the Ḥaddād's *Ḥikāyāt al-Mahjar*, which focused on challenges of assimilation for the earliest Arab American community. This theme also provides fitting transition to the final work, *Chicago* (2008), whose action shifts between a wide cast of characters at different stages in their transition to America.

Māhir Labīb is the head of the academic center that invited Shukri to teach in San Francisco. Also Egyptian, upon finishing his doctorate Māhir chose to stay in America, where he and his wife Faṭḥiyya raise two children and become American citizens. Māhir is well-adjusted and thriving in his American environment, even being described by Shukri as 'deceptively American.' As an historian, Māhir's profession keeps him closely tied to his Egyptian roots, while his post at the university melds his profession with the American educational system. Māhir's familial situation reveals the intense challenges of dealing with double identity issues. Upon visiting Māhir and Faṭḥiyya's home, Shukri inquires about the children, and Māhir's wife Faṭḥiyya embarrassingly admits that they chose to spend time with friends, since they don't speak Arabic. Shukri notices tourist posters of the Sphinx and the Cairo Tower adorning the walls, and the television tuned to an Arabic satellite channel. Faṭḥiyya can't contain her embarrassment over the absence of their children, and emotionally explains to Shukri how they erred as parents in not speaking Arabic to their children, figuring that they would never return to Egypt. The mere mention of the word Egypt causes Faṭḥiyya to sob, as she proclaims, "Oh Egypt, how I miss you. Here I lack nothing but I'm so unhappy" [*Amrīkānlī*, p. 61].

Shukri's visit to Māhir and Fathīyya's home concentrates on the distressing reality of this Arab American family. The home itself is full of visual and linguistic markers of their Arab roots, between the posters and satellite TV. The absence of the children and Fathīyya's anguish over their upbringing reveals a disconnect between the Arab and the American aspects of their lives. Even though Fathīyya attempts to justify the absence of the children through their lack of knowledge of Arabic, this is quite ironic, since Shukri speaks English fluently. Their absence, therefore, is a deeper reflection of the fact that Arabs are visiting, and the children are *choosing* to be with American friends. This scene presents an extreme contrast between Fathīyya, who not only cries over the mere mention of Egypt, but admits to sitting on the couch and watching Arabic satellite TV all day, and the two absent children who are disconnected from their Egyptian roots, and willfully so. Given Fathīyya's emotional reaction, Shukri does not make further inquiries into the familial dynamics, instead simply leaving the reader with Fathīyya's raw nostalgia and intense guilt. This scene dramatizes the painful consequences of emigration and assimilation by refracting this pain through a single Arab American family whose individual members occupy drastically different positions in the identification spectrum from Arab to American. This family's story is uncannily similar to *al-Amal wa al-Alam* from Ḥaddād's collection, which also portrayed an intense generational disconnect between parents and children, demonstrating this disconnect through painful familial fissures.

Later in the novel Shukri is introduced to a large contingent of Egyptian Americans when Mahir invites him to give a guest lecture at a monthly meeting of San Francisco's Egyptian American community. This outing provides new insight into this

community, albeit the successful among them, as Mahir points out the fact that most attendees are business owners, lawyers, engineers and doctors, reflecting the professional 'brain drain' from the homeland. Shukri launches into his lecture, which is a detailed exposé on how interesting details of the personal and sexual lives of Egyptian leaders like King Farouq and Anwar Sadat played a role in their political decision-making, essentially disparaging these Egyptian leaders. The crowd is visibly irked and most leave in the middle of the lecture. What Shukri learns is that the real purpose of these gatherings is to provide a sense of community based on a celebration of Egyptian roots. This set of expectations eerily replicate those of the Egyptian academy that Shukri has spent his career militating against. The disconnect portrayed in this scene is quite alarming. Shukri, for his part, believes that the freedom of thought afforded him in America, something he has been actualizing in his class at the university, is universal in America. The Egyptian American community, he discovers, has not relinquished certain behaviors and ideas systemic to the homeland. The event is a disappointment for both Shukri and his audience for totally different reasons; as the historian from Egypt lecturing an Egyptian American audience he feels comfortable transcending the parochial thinking he battled in Egypt, meanwhile this audience of Egyptian Americans, distanced from the homeland, clings to an unrealistic pure image of the homeland that they do not want to tarnish. This lecture scene and the scene at Mahir's house highlight varied assumptions, disconnections, and misunderstandings among Egyptians in America, subsequently drawing attention to the vast multitude of perspectives, internalizations, and conflicts in negotiating the Egyptian American identity.

‘Alā’ al-‘Aswānī (b. 1957) was born into a well-to-do and educated Egyptian family. His father ‘Abbās was a prominent lawyer who penned a weekly back-page article in *Rūz al-Yūsuf*. Al-‘Aswānī developed a love for literature at a young age, even though he ended up studying dentistry. He constantly worked on his own writing on the side, in the vein of many Egyptian intellectuals. His forceful emergence onto the literary and intellectual scene in his native Egypt was tied to the massive success of his novel *The Yacoubian Building* in 2002. The many reprints of *The Yacoubian Building*, its translation into more than thirty languages, and its subsequent adaptation into Egypt’s biggest budget film in 2007, elevated al-‘Aswānī in the public eye, a position he would not shy away from. Al-‘Aswānī has welcomed his dual status as author and public intellectual. He was one of the few intellectuals present and active in Tahrīr Square during the protests against Mubarak in 2011. He has continued his advocacy as a prominent liberal voice in Egypt through editorials and public appearances.

In reading al-‘Aswānī’s fiction, it is easy to understand how the author of *al-Nīrān al-Ṣadīqa* (*Friendly Fire*, 2004), *‘Imārat Ya‘qūbiyān* (*The Yacoubian Building*, 2002), *Shikāghū* (*Chicago*, 2008), and other works, would succeed in Egypt’s public sphere as a prominent liberal voice. The themes that dominate his fiction include criticism of government corruption and oppression, as well as the lack of democracy and social justice in society. As such, he is a writer carrying on the tradition of the *multazim* – the committed writer – in contemporary Egypt. The domination of thematic concerns in his fiction has brought a backlash in literary circles, and al-‘Aswānī has responded in kind, claiming, “the problem with Arab literature has been that it forgot to tell stories and

lost its way in experimentation.”¹²⁴ Hence, much of al-ʿAswānī’s literature pulsates with the same thematic concerns that animate his editorial writing, as his fiction and public advocacy appear to be two sides of the same coin.

While *The Yacoubian Building* made a name for al-ʿAswānī in Egypt and abroad, it is *Shīkāghū* (*Chicago* from this point forward) that will be analyzed here. *Chicago* follows in the footsteps of *Amrīkānlī*, *New York 80*, and even *The Book of Khalid*, as a work of fiction resultant of a real lived experience by its Arab author. Al-ʿAswānī spent three years living and studying dentistry in Chicago, from 1984-1987. Like those authors who preceded him, this experience in America made a lasting impression on him, and almost two decades after his stay, he would use this American city as the setting for his own literary explorations of America.

Chicago Summary

Chicago is a lengthy but fast-paced novel set in Chicago that weaves together the stories of a variety of characters who are predominately of Egyptian origins. Within this American metropolis, every character is somehow connected to the University of Illinois. Like the famous building in his first novel, *The Yacoubian Building*, characters in *Chicago* are brought into relationships with one another through one central locale. From this organizing nexus *Chicago* branches out into the lives of Egyptians and a few Americans, opening the narration to a variety of lived experiences and transitions of these characters in their American environs, with a particular focus on interactions within the

¹²⁴ Mishra, Pankaj. “Where Alaa al-Aswany is Writing From.” *NY Times Magazine*, April 27, 2008, pg. 6.

Egyptian community in Chicago. One of the novel's feats is to relocate a wide cast of Egyptian subjectivities onto an American urban landscape.

The organizing locale of the novel is the Department of Histology at the University of Illinois in Chicago. The characters' relationship to this department undergirds the novel's multigenerational approach to its many characters, revealed through an older generation of doctors and researchers, in addition to a younger generation of students pursuing their advanced degrees within the department. The peripheral characters are composed of lovers, spouses, children, and others who interact with this core group drawn together by the Department of Histology. The novel's action takes place over the course of a few months, but this short period of time is replete with intense traumas and personal crises in the lives of the wide cast of characters depicted. The intensity of these events skirts the line of hyperbole, creating a soap operaesque quality to the narration in that this cast of intertwined characters are all experiencing weighty drama as the reader shifts deliberately between their tales. The style of *Chicago* is loosely reminiscent of ʿAbd al-Masīḥ Ḥaddād's *Ḥikāyāt al-Mahjar* in that this single work collates a multitude of experiences of Arabs in America.

Given the wide cast of characters, the novel's plot is really a conglomeration of multiple subplots, as individual characters or pairs of characters narrate their experiences. Shaymāʿ, a female student from a conservative rural Egyptian family, has trouble balancing her traditional origins with the liberal American values that she encounters. Raʿfat, a doctor in the department, has crafted a life in America which represents the attempt to revoke all that is Egyptian in favor of perceived American values. Nāḡī is an incoming student devoted to revolutionary politics in Egypt, and his America encounter

only bolsters his belief in the need for democracy at home. Nāgī's counterpart within the student body is Aḥmad Danāna, who is the head of the Egyptian Student Union, and works in concert with official Egyptian state interests in trying to control the activities of Egyptians abroad. Dr. Salāḥ, the purported 'Mayor' of the Egyptian community in Chicago, appears to seamlessly merge his Egyptian origins and adopt an American identity, but is caught in the midst of a deep personal crisis. An American doctor with his own narration in the story, Dr. Graham, is supportive of his left-leaning colleagues, but his own story is complicated by his relationship to an African American woman named Carol. The list continues, but forthcoming analysis of *Chicago* will pick up threads of narration merely presented as single-sentence snapshots here.

The major event in *Chicago* that acts as a narrative climax, and involves the participation of a wide cast of the novel's characters, is the attempt to publicly insult the Egyptian President during his visit to the Egyptian Consulate in Chicago. Nāgī, the revolutionary student, concocts a plan with a Coptic Egyptian surgeon name Karam to deliver a public statement of protest on the occasion of the President's visit. The President is unnamed in the novel, but is obviously former Egyptian President Ḥosnī Mubārak. This plan, directly or indirectly, involves nearly all of the novel's main characters. Dr. Salāḥ is vetted to actually deliver the message to the President at the consulate in his capacity as the 'Mayor' of Chicago's Egyptian community. Dr. Graham, the American, is actively involved with Nāgī and Dr. Karam in helping plan the formal petition of protest and the details of the petition's delivery. Egyptian students like Shaymā' and Ṭāriq are made aware of the anti-government petition as Nāgī and Karam circulate it within the Egyptian community in Chicago, seeking support. The head of the

Egyptian Student Union, Aḥmad Danāna, is highly concerned with the petition given his responsibility for monitoring Egyptian students' activities. The attempt to deliver this petition in a public forum, intended to insult the Egyptian President, represents the climax of the narrative. Dr. Salāḥ's inability to carry out this defiant act is a massive disappointment for Nāgī and Karam. This disappointment seems to act as a narrative trigger that initiates a series of unrelated devastations for other characters in *Chicago*. As the novel hastens towards a close, following this failed act of defiance, a baffling series of events mark the novel's denouement, including Dr. Salāḥ's suicide, a drug overdose by Dr. Raʿfat's daughter, and Shaymā's abortion. As previous texts on the American encounter have evinced, and *Chicago* violently restates, these outcomes reveal a horrifying American nightmare instead of an American dream.

The devastating series of narrative resolutions in *Chicago* is truly overwhelming. These events are overly dramatized fictional culminations of the thematic concerns that dominate *Chicago*. The main event, the failed attempt to insult the President, represents the fear and paralysis involved in attempting to speak truth to power; Dr. Salāḥ's suicide accentuates these emotions. The death of Raʿfat's daughter is emblematic of Raʿfat's erasure of his Egyptian past, a painful process refracting through his family life, to which his daughter becomes victim. American characters are not spared from this narrative chaos, as Dr. Graham's partner Carol is caught in a web of deceit and adultery. Shaymā's abortion, which concludes the novel, only reconfirms the potential devastation inherent to this Egyptian encounter with America.

The Polyphony of Egyptian Voices

The most fundamental formal difference between *Chicago* and the other texts on the American encounter is the lack of a single protagonist that moderates this encounter. Each chapter in *Chicago* switches to a different story and voice, and it is only through the polyphony of voices that this narrative, as a whole, develops. This narrative strategy empowers a variety of different Egyptian voices to articulate unique perspectives and experiences, giving a panoramic view on the American encounter. The notion of polyphony was active in *Amrīkānī* as well, as Ibrāhīm's novel ceded narrative ground to various characters, allowing their perspectives to take over the narrative at particular moments. *Chicago* shifts the format by depicting multiple protagonists, the majority of whom are Egyptian, thereby presenting a novel that actualizes a polyphony through an exploration of manifold Egyptian voices, positions, and experiences. There is a plurality of Egyptian experience imbedded into the narrative structure.

The identifications and depictions of this cast of Egyptian characters, as previously mentioned, are divided between a settled generation of physicians, and the incoming Egyptian students. This divide depicts two different stages of the encounter; the older generation of Egyptian-Americans that has assimilated, albeit unevenly, and the younger generation who is in the midst of dealing with the complex transition accompanying their move to America. In what follows, I will map out the construction of some of these Egyptian protagonists to give a sense of how the novel manages this polyphony and how these subjectivities function in presenting the American encounter.

Dr. Ra³fat Thābit is presented as an assimilated Egyptian American par excellence. The manifestations of his adopted nationality include his love of

iconographic aspects of American life: he spends his Sunday's attending baseball games and drinking beer; he drives a big Cadillac sedan; he speaks accentless English, proclaiming, when asked where he is from, "I am a Chicagoan" [*Shikāghū*, p. 43].¹²⁵ Ra³fat is a one-dimensional character whose essence emerges from the fact that "his intense pride in all things American and his contempt for everything Egyptian explains all he does" [*Shikāghū*, p. 45]. This dynamic is taken to an extreme after September 11th, when he vocally supports the idea of preventing all Muslims from entering the United States, despite his own religious background. Ra³fat's intense scorn for his native country emanates from the Nasser years when his father's glass company was nationalized by Nasser's economic policies. This fact reveals Ra³fat's core identifications with America as purely reactionary. His character is not constructed to reify the adopted American values and mindset to which he ascribes, but to reveal their artifice. The reactionary drive behind this character not only problematizes Ra³fat's glamorization of America, but makes clear the primacy of his Egyptian origins, even through their strong denial. As a unique voice within the spectrum of Egyptians, Ra³fat's depiction as an American reduces these points of 'American' identification to a set of stereotypes and material objects, recycling misunderstandings that have been common through the literary history of the American encounter.

Among the same cohort with Ra³fat is an Egyptian heart surgeon named Karam Dūs. Karam's most pressing identification in *Chicago* is his Coptic affiliation. This identification is not an issue of religiosity, but an issue of minority status, especially in his memories of the oppression he faced due to his minority religious status in Egypt.

¹²⁵ al-³Aswānī, °Alā°. *Shikāghū*. (Cairo: Dār al-Shurūq, 2007), pg. 43. My translations.

Karam was humiliated as a medical student at °Ayn Shams University, where he was intentionally flunked, and referred to by the head surgeon as a *khawāga* – the not so flattering Egyptian term for a foreigner. Karam’s emigration to America allowed him the opportunity to achieve his goals in the medical profession, but emigration also produced a poignant ambivalence towards his new American home. As the novel relates, “from the first days in America a number of things became apparent: his status as a Christian meant nothing in American society, as he was first and foremost a colored Arab” [*Shikāghū*, p. 242]. Karam’s character accentuates a potentially painful realization of emigration and transnational codes of oppression; fleeing minority *religious* status in Egypt leads only to gaining minority *racial* status in America. Karam’s character represents the realities of a doubled alienation from native and adopted geographies.

On a personal level, Karam’s attachments to his native country, while damaged through the inequalities he experienced there, remained intact. The cultural attachments he maintains to Egypt are beautifully depicted in his choice of music when he performs surgery, playing Umm Kulthoum to calm his nerves. In addition, his focus on Egyptian politics and inequalities drive his narrative voice. Having achieved incredible professional and financial success as a heart surgeon in America, Karam remains fixated on rectifying the debilitating conditions he faced in Egypt. Nāgī’s arrival, in his capacity as an optimistic young revolutionary, injects Karam with a newfound vigor, and the two commiserate in their plan to read a petition of grievances directly to the Egyptian President at the consulate in Chicago. Karam is willing to risk his status and achievements for this controversial act of defiance in the name of progress for Egypt. He represents a much more nuanced and ambivalent voice than Ra³fat, as he remains

problematically devoted to his native country. Both characters reveal the centrality of Egypt to their lives in America, as each character is fundamentally constructed through their relationship to Egypt, and neither truly engages with America in any meaningful way.

Nāgī °Abd al-Şamad is among the generation of Egyptian students who constitute the second generation of characters in *Chicago*. Nāgī is the only character whose narration in *Chicago* includes both the typical third-person narration in addition to portions of first-person narration, giving him an elevated status, narratologically speaking. This unique formal dynamic within the narrative structure brands Nāgī's voice as the conscience of the novel. His voice is that of a leftist revolutionary, completely dedicated to promoting resistance to forms of oppression and injustice. This leftist voice is one that has become a familiar feature in the composition of characters in the American encounter in Arabic, as exemplified by protagonists in *al-Rihla* and *Amrīkānlī*. Nāgī's energetic voice of resistance is global in scope; he wages criticism of the corruption and inequality in Egypt, and in the same breath criticizes America's political alignments in the Middle East. Nāgī's revolutionary political rhetoric transcends national borders, highlighting the transnational interconnectivity of channels of injustice and oppression, America's support for dictatorial regimes a principal gripe.

Despite the universalism of Nāgī's critical voice, his character remains totally consumed with Egyptian revolutionary activities throughout his stay in America. In fact, his character, more than any other, is used to demonstrate the transposition of Egypt onto the American landscape. This transposition is illuminated through Egyptian characters' relationships to Nāgī: there are his supporters, like Dr. Karam and Salāḥ; there are those

indifferent to his leftist politics, like Shaymā⁹ and Ṭāriq; and those hard line elements who oppose and try to thwart him, in Aḥmad Danāna and Ṣafwat Shākīr of the state intelligence sector. Through Nāgī's voice and interactions, a full spectrum of the anxieties and fears of Egyptian politics are transferred onto the American domestic landscape, the upshot of which is confirmation that the fictional landscape of *Chicago* is less involved with America per se, but more about utilizing this space to reconceive the problems of Egypt. Only to emphasize this disconnect, Nāgī's encounters with America and Americans represent America through a hyperbolic sexualized typecasting. He procures a prostitute early in his stay, an interaction reminiscent of *New York 80*, reducing America to its overly sexualized and consumerist influences. He also begins a relationship with an American woman, which is more substantive, but is brought to an abrupt end because she is Jewish, and his inherited political intuition ultimately forces a rejection of this union. These encounters notwithstanding, Nāgī's character and voice imbue the novel with a centripetal force that threatens to reduce this literary encounter to an inter-Egyptian political confrontation.

Aḥmad Danāna is an Egyptian student who reinforces the tense Egypt-centric perspective that Nāgī's character initiates. Initial descriptions of Aḥmad Danāna emphasize elements of his static rural Egyptian character, describing him in the following way: "he was like a genie who popped out of a bottle or a time machine ... with rural Egyptian features, a prayer-bruise on his forehead, prayer beads always in hand. He would stroll on the streets of Chicago as if he were leisurely walking the irrigation paths in his village" [*Shikāghū*, p. 66]. While this initial description casts him as a particular type, intentionally oblivious to his American surroundings, his actions mix this innocent

rural caricature with repugnant principles resultant of his cooperation with Egyptian state intelligence. In his capacity as president of the Egyptian Student Union, Danāna reports on the activities of other students. Danāna's abuse of power amongst his fellow Egyptian student is not his only insipid quality, but his personal life reveals horrible acts of cruelty. He physically abuses his wife, raping her, and forcing her to stay home. He also interprets the tenets of Islam to serve his own base needs, declaring America *Dār al-Kufr* (land of infidels) to justify his disregard of American laws and values. Danāna's character is a conglomeration of vile attributes and deeds intended to personify the abuses of dictatorial power and the emergence of religious extremism taking hold in Egypt and elsewhere in the Arab world, a common site of critique among secular humanist Arab writers. As such, this character transfers this nightmare of Egyptian state surveillance and abuse onto American soil. In addition, Danāna's construction in the novel embodies a target upon which al-Aswānī unleashes his criticism of a multitude of problems within Egypt, including abuse of women, religious hypocrisy, and blatant corruption.

One of the few characters that adds a female voice to the Egyptian polyphony in the novel is the student Shaymā³ Muḥammadī. Shaymā³ is the first character introduced in the novel, and the one character whose familial origins and background are inscribed in depth. She grew up in Ṭanṭā in a traditional Muslim family, and was encouraged to pursue her education. But in Ṭanṭā, pursuing this path as a woman came at a personal cost, since the local gender norms dictated that a groom advanced further in his education than his bride. America presents Shaymā³ with educational opportunities that would have been impossible for her to pursue in her local environment. What Shaymā³ deems even more important is that pursuing her studies in Chicago gave her the opportunity to

flee the stifling societal expectations regarding marriage, ever increasing after heading into her thirties. America, for Shaymā³, is the escape route. The irony of Shaymā³'s character is that while she defies tradition in travelling abroad, once she arrives in Chicago she suffers from anxiety, deep nostalgia and painful loneliness. Instead of exploring, experiencing and 'owning' America as was the case with Raḍwā °Āshūr in *al-Rihla*, Shaymā³ turns inwards. She eventually becomes acquainted with her environment through an Egyptian student, Ṭāriq, with whom she begins a relationship. For the most part, Shaymā³ replicates the Egyptian reality she just fled. Even though leaving Egypt was a release from social pressures, her distance and alienation lead to nostalgia, resulting in an attempt to recreate this reality. Shaymā³'s voice and interactions with her new environment demonstrate the deeply ingrained psychological grip of tradition and familial pressures.

The characters profiled above represent five of the nine main characters presented in *Chicago*. In considering the fact that *Chicago* presents an encounter between Arabs and America, this novel cedes narration to a wide cast of Egyptian personalities, but this does not result in a pluralistic encounter with America one might expect. Rather, the novel presents characters who are defined, or even plagued, by their identifications with Egypt. Ra³fat is the reactionary, Karam a scorned nationalist, Nāgī the romantic revolutionary, Danāna the vile dictator, and Shaymā³ is the oppressed victim of tradition. These voices stamp the insularity of this novel, which has transferred a cast of Egyptian characters to America, only to reveal their obsessions with Egypt. This narrative focus on Egypt and the transferal of Egypt's problems onto an American landscape underscores the diminishing importance of borders, both real and imagined, in producing this

transnational vision. This polyphony of Egyptian voices also begs the question, what is the significance of America and Americans to this novel, the question we turn to next.

American Voices and Spatial Representations

Shifting away from *Chicago's* transplant of Egyptian concerns on a foreign geography, the novel's actual encounter with America emerges through a cast of mainly peripheral characters, a limited geographical scope, and selective elaborations on American history. Unlike *Amrīkānlī's* intense investigations of urban geographies, *Chicago*, despite the novel's title, is far less dynamic on this front, necessitating an approach that studies the American voices and histories inserted into the novel in addition to the tangible geographies depicted. The novel in fact opens with a brief treatise on the history of the city to situate the reader. Al-³Aswānī's historical sketch begins with a description of the first inhabitants of the area, the Algonquin tribe, from which the name Chicago emerged. The novel relates how this peaceful tribe of American Indians was subsequently exterminated by Christian European missionaries in a series of bloody wars. From these wars the introduction then shifts to Chicago's great fire of 1871, which resulted in the total destruction of a huge percentage of the city and the death of nearly a third of its population. This historical sketch to open the novel approaches Chicago's history through a series of devastating tragedies. Opening the novel as such has a purpose, confirming that this city was built upon heartbreak and devastation, as the achievements of the city are largely absent. The focus on the bloody expulsion of the Algonquians due to Christian missionary zeal has strong overtones of the Crusades. The details of the 1871 fire have a secondary function early in the novel involving Shaymā³,

as the first character introduced just after this historical sketch. Shortly after her arrival Shaymāʾ mistakenly sets off a fire alarm, sounding the call reminiscent of such an historic devastation in the city's history. Essentially this opening presents Chicago, and America, by extension, through a tragic historical lens. This prepares the stage for the American nightmares, not dreams, to come.

The novel's shift into Chicago's history occurs at a second juncture in the novel, this time focused on the city's troubled history of race relations. This brief interlude is quite specific, recalling three events spread across the 20th century. These include the murder of Eugene Williams in 1919, the black teenager who purportedly swam into the whites only beach, and was murdered. Then a march organized by Martin Luther King in 1966 is discussed, which resulted in a violent reaction by Chicago's white community. Thirdly, the novel relays a story from 1984, when a wealthy black couple moved into an affluent white neighborhood, resulting in these neighbors burning down their house.

Chicago's narrator writes about this troubled racial history, "over the course of Chicago's history, the racial divide has remained the solid truth, there is no ignoring or evading it" [*Shikāghū*, p. 219]. These scattered historical events are presented in the novel as Raʾfat is on the cusp of venturing into Chicago's South Side to find his daughter. There is an element of sensationalism that these historical glimpses inject into the novel. Singular historical events, largely decontextualized, are presented as a progression of static animosity that plagues the city. It comes as no surprise, therefore, when Raʾfat is robbed by a black man when he drives into the South Side. Real historical events morph into fictional events in a way that deleteriously portrays and sensationalizes Chicago. While the literariness of the work suffers from these awkwardly placed historical insertions into

the novel, the criticism inherent in their usage is clear; similar to the notion of ‘writing back’ to empire discussed earlier, criticizing America can empower the self.

When this selective history is combined with the cast of American characters it becomes clear that a similar reductionism is in operation. With the exception of the American doctors at the university, American characters are inserted into the narration to emphasize prejudicial aspects of American society, such as drug addiction, prostitution, and racism. For example, Raʿfat’s daughter Sarah, whom he has proudly raised to be ‘American’ according to his understanding, is lured into drug addiction. Raʿfat understands his daughter’s downward spiral as a result of her immersion in American society. While he has championed his own ‘American’ identifications, the superficiality of these identifications are thrown into relief by his own American daughter. Sarah as a character in *Chicago* serves a particular function; she presents a radical counterpoint to the America conjured up by her father. In doing so she embodies the devastation of drugs and crime as an intrinsic aspect of the American landscape, yet her one-dimensionality offers little nuance to an otherwise complex social ill. Unlike *Amrīkānlī*, where similar issues were carefully treated and observed in the narrative, *Chicago* chooses to sensationalize societal problems as if they are particularly American aberrations, and not universal constructs.

Dr. Graham’s partner Carol provides another example of how the novel sublimates character into theme, sacrificing individuation in the process. Carol is black, and her purpose in *Chicago* becomes an extension of race and gender prejudices she faces. As a couple, the two are insulted publicly, refused entrance to restaurants, and in a particularly disturbing incident, Dr. Graham is asked “how much he purchased the slave

for” [*Shikāghū*, p. 189]. The racially motivated abuse that Carol endures is horrific, and frankly seems contrived in 21st century Chicago, an opinion shared in a book review of *Chicago*.¹²⁶ A portion of the narration follows Carol as she ventures out to seek employment. She is constantly rejected and ridiculed, despite her qualifications. The frustration she experiences leads to her work in modeling, which devolves from modeling clothing to nude modeling. Carol is caught between the temptations of money and the glamour of this career, where moral quandaries abound. Carol is seduced by the money and ephemeral pleasure, leading to the disastrous collapse of her relationship with Dr. Graham. Her character follows this seemingly inevitable trajectory, functioning as a vehicle for staging America’s racial and socioeconomic inequalities. The humiliations over her race, the lack of employment opportunities, the sexual objectification of her body, and the economic coercion pushing her towards this fate are the themes that her character embodies.

Another avenue to seek the significance of America and Americans within this novel is through place and geography. While *Chicago* opens by situating the reader in the city through a historical lens, effectively introducing the urban landscape of the novel’s action, the novel itself is extremely insular and dismissive of its urban environment. This geographical insularity replicates the insularity of the Egyptian community presented in the novel. As far as space and geography are concerned, the novel is confined to the university, its dormitory, and the homes of the physicians. Chicago, despite being the namesake of the novel, has little significance to the novel itself, as it could have been set in any American city. The novel has a wide cast of

¹²⁶ Ligaya, Mishan. “Alaa al-Aswany’s ‘Chicago’.” *The New York Times*, January 2, 2009.

characters, and their ventures into the urban landscape are expressions of their personal predicaments. For example, Chicago's South Side enters into the narration through Ra³fat's search for his daughter, whom he finds in a dilapidated home doing drugs. Karam and Nāgī are said to traverse the urban landscape to collect signatures for the petition, but this is not part of the novel's narration. Karam and Nāgī make one significant geographical shift in the novel, between Dr. Graham's house, where they plan their moment of resistance, and the Egyptian Consulate in downtown Chicago where they carry out the act. Shaymā³ and Ṭāriq's budding relationship, which would have had the most potential in allowing the city to enter into the text, is confined to their dorm and the vivid descriptions of her trip to an abortion clinic at the novel's close. Chicago, and America, as "place" is effectively relegated to its introductory history, recollections of its troubled racial past, and interior spaces. Much like *New York 80*, whose title contained the name of the city without truly engaging it, there is barely any recognition of America as a significant and dynamic place beyond the themes, criticisms and crises that Egyptian characters' presence therein precipitate. There is an annihilation of place, an erasure, that in itself is significant in maintaining the focus on internal Arab affairs.

Identity Negotiations and Narrative Resolutions

Within the fast-paced narration and dramatic events in *Chicago* are a number of Egyptian characters mired in personal crises. The insular feel that the novel projects is only intensified by the anguishing personal circumstances in which many characters are enveloped. For example, Ra³fat is forced to face his conflicted identifications through his daughter's addiction, Salāḥ's marital crisis leads to a psychological breakdown, and

Shaymā's relationship with Ṭāriq challenges her belief system. In each of these instances, Egyptian characters are explicitly or implicitly involved in a self-evaluation assessing their identifications with and against America and Egypt. These intense moments of reflection and crisis offer a more intricate look into the place of America in the psyche of the novel's Egyptian characters.

Ra'fat's crisis in *Chicago* is enmeshed in his reactions to his daughter Sarah's behavior throughout the novel. As previously discussed, Ra'fat has adopted all the adornments of American identity, considering himself a *true* American. His reactions to his daughter leaving home to move in with her boyfriend tests the limits of his attempt to expunge all 'eastern' tendencies in his characters constitution. Ra'fat is initially in denial over his own identity crisis, while friends are keenly aware of his predicament. After Ra'fat expresses his disapproval to Salāḥ regarding his daughter's choice to move out and live with her boyfriend, Salāḥ tries to convince Ra'fat of how commonplace Sarah's choice is in America, where young adults frequently cohabitate. Salāḥ pities Ra'fat as a man who "hates his culture and carries it within him at the same time" [*Shīkāghū*, p. 80]. Ra'fat's denial of his identity crisis is intensified by the fact that this crisis is enacted through the crucible of cultural identification: the family unit. Despite Salāḥ's advice that Ra'fat respect his daughter's decision to move out, Ra'fat is compelled one evening to track her down, to see her and reassert control. He finds her boyfriend's apartment on Chicago's South Side and witnesses the couple snorting cocaine and about to have sex. Ra'fat's reaction is violent, when Sarah opens the door he beats her, screaming before leaving, "I will kill you!" [*Shīkāghū*, p. 225]. The intensity and violence of this scene dramatizes Ra'fat's inability to accept American social codes. Ra'fat's random visit to

his daughter breaks the unwritten code of personal privacy respected in America. The outcome of his transgression is devastating.

In Raʿfat’s final encounter with his daughter, she airs her own grievances, blaming him as the cause of all her problems. She screams, “You are a fake ... a failed actor playing a ridiculous role that convinces no one! Who are you? Egyptian or American? You’ve lived your life wanting to be American and you’ve failed” [Shikāghū, p. 393]. Sarah is clearly the living embodiment of Raʿfat’s identity crisis, as she is his greatest failure, representing the anguish of a life lived in denial. This episode represents a more psychologically nuanced, yet similar reaction penned by Ḥaddād early in the 20th century, where the children openly insulted their Syrian father. Sarah’s demise therefore is Raʿfat’s demise, in that it is predicated on her inability to manage two sets of cultural expectations, the America set that she understands, and the hidden Egyptian expectations that are never enunciated by her father, yet remain latent. The conflicting duality has been concealed by Raʿfat, but is incarnated in Sarah, leading to her addiction and eventual death. Raʿfat must bear witness to this incarnation of his own deep-seated conflict. Raʿfat’s crisis not only demonstrates the devastation inherent in suppressing one’s roots, but revisits the didactic urge of the literature of encounter, in illustrating a horrifying example of what could happen to a life lived in denial.

Salāḥ’s primary role in *Chicago* revolves around his own devastating personal crisis in America. After thirty years of living a successful and balanced life in America Salāḥ experiences the onset of impotence, which precipitates his total breakdown. In a visit to a psychiatrist he begins rehashing powerful and humiliating memories he tried to suppress for thirty years. These memories are encapsulated in one poignant moment,

when his first love called him a coward for choosing to emigrate to America. This moment occurred in the midst of the student protests in Egypt in the early 1970s. His first love, Zaynab Raḍwān, was an active participant in these protests, who was beaten and incarcerated while Salāḥ prepared to leave for America. Salāḥ's feelings of cowardice mix with memories of the intense love he had for Zaynab, as the novel clearly links his impotence to the psychological culmination of the guilt and cowardice he had suppressed for the past thirty years while living in America.

Unlike Raʿfat, whose complete denial of his problems results in the transference of these problems onto his daughter, Salāḥ's engagement with his predicament is very self-conscious and revealing. Salāḥ's recognition of his suppressed cowardice results in dramatic changes in his daily life. He first requests a separation from his American wife Kris, and then sequesters himself in the basement of their house every day after returning from work, where he attempts to reconnect with the life he lost. On this descent into the basement, the novel relates, "he was no longer here, he passed the barrier to the other side, where he discovered a magical world ... he'd enter it at night to glimpse its beauty before the day assaulted him" [*Shikāghū*, p. 336]. This 'magical world' of the basement, for Salāḥ, becomes his refuge from the 'real' world he desired. In the basement he adorns himself in his old clothes from Egypt and listens to Arabic music. After finding an old phonebook, he begins calling every single number, speaking with acquaintances he hadn't spoken to in thirty years. The intense juxtaposition of the 'real' and 'artificial' is what is at stake here; Salāḥ's definition of the 'real' is, in reality, his fantasy. Where Raʿfat is consumed by denial, Salāḥ is choosing a flight into fantasy.

The most poignant moment of Salāḥ's flight from reality is his reconnection with Zaynab Raḍwān, his first love. He calls her, and their conversation becomes an exposé on the deterioration that Egypt has experienced since the 1970s. Zaynab is a government employee now, highlighting an example of how the state was able to coopt elements of resistance. Zaynab expresses her devastation over the government corruption she witnesses, the influence of Wahabism in Egypt, and the power of Egypt's military establishment. Salāḥ patiently listens, eventually arriving at the memory that had caused him so much anguish, recalling how she called him a coward for emigrating. Zaynab stands by her words, then and now, claiming that despite all the misfortunes that have befallen their nation, his staying would have been better than emigrating. Through Zaynab, the novel reconfirms Salāḥ's crisis. Salāḥ joins Ra'fat as a fictionalized expression of the devastations potential in the process of emigration to America. In both instances there is a fixation on the notion of 'artificial' and 'real', creating a reductive binary that attaches America to these artificial attributes, while Egypt is always what is 'real.' This binary is reminiscent of the rejectionist paradigm on the American encounter established in the *Mahjar*, such as the zealous return and investment in the 'land' by Khalid and Abū Ma'arūf in Rihani and Nu'ayma's fiction, which also dramatically accentuated the divide between America and the Arab world in an effort to make sense of the inherent anxiety of emigration and alienation.

The arc of Shaymā's character, in representing the younger generation in *Chicago*, is revelatory of the immediate impact of transitioning to America. Shaymā comes from a traditional Muslim background and is warned ad nauseam by her parents about the dangers she will encounter in post-9/11 America. While Shaymā is eager to

extract herself from the social pressures weighing on her in Egypt, her transition to America is not the liberation she may have imagined. She is immediately overwhelmed by feelings of nostalgia, longing and regret for having moved away from home. In this mental state, she turns inward, gaining strength from Islam, and trying to replicate aspects of home through music and food. Her insularity is also reflected in the company she keeps, which is exclusively Arabs from among the student delegation.

Life takes a decisive turn for Shaymā⁹ when she meets Ṭāriq Ḥasīb, a fellow Egyptian student. She and Ṭāriq begin a romantic relationship in America that tests Shaymā's convictions and cause her to reconsider her parents' advice. The fact that this relationship is cultivated in America adds a unique dimension to its trajectory. As Shaymā⁹ contemplates her involvement with Ṭāriq she begins to question her traditional upbringing, especially her mother's religiously inflected warnings regarding pre-marital relations. Shayma's deliberations flash between experiences and observations in Egypt and America. Reflecting on her time in Egypt she recalls friends' stories of adulterous relationships that resulted in love and lasting marriages. In America, she is envious of the public affection expressed between lovers, asking why God has not shown his wrath if this entire country is adulterous! Essentially, Shaymā⁹ is revealing a level of cultural accommodation in contemplating a combination of Egyptian stories and American scenes that are diametrically opposed to her mother's traditions, creating a synergy between Egypt and America as justification for her budding relationship. Shaymā⁹ even visits Chicago's public library to scour Bukhari's collection of Hadith to confirm the

permissibility of her romantic relationship with Ṭāriq.¹²⁷ The symbolism of this venture is profound, as she reconsiders her own culture and deepens her knowledge of Islamic precepts in an American public library. Shaymā³ continues to have pangs of guilt, given her strong ties to family and tradition, but she is also liberated by her choices in America. She is a character, like Ra³fat and Salāḥ, who tests the possibility of synthesizing her traditional origins and her new American reality. As such, her personal crisis rehashes the paradigm of cultural synthesis as she thoughtfully and painstakingly molds her new life.

The multiplicity of protagonists in *Chicago* allows for a wide array of character arcs, paradigms, and thematic concerns within the same novel. The narrative resolutions of these characters' stories, on the other hand, present a similarly destructive pattern. The three characters profiled above, for example, experience the following fates: Ra³fat's daughter Sarah is killed from a drug overdose, Salāḥ commits suicide after failing to deliver the protest petition to the President, and Shaymā³ aborts a baby she and Ṭāriq conceived. These narrative resolutions are a multi-tiered wave of destruction that rapidly brings the novel to a close. Overdose, suicide and abortion as narrative resolutions conjoin the problems and crises of these Egyptian characters with devastating problems certainly present in the American landscape. More pointedly, these horrible problems are those sensational issues that tend to be present in how the outside world perceives America. *Chicago* drives its characters into these horrifying ends, producing an America that is beyond salvation as these Egyptian characters become uncontrollably bound to these negative and hyperbolic forces.

¹²⁷ Bukhari's collection of Hadith, known as Ṣaḥīḥ Bukhārī, is one of the six major compilations of Prophetic sayings in Sunni Islam. It is considered by many Muslims to be the most reliable compilation.

These types of negative resolutions have not been uncommon to the American encounter in Arabic literature. As far back as 1911 the protagonist of *The Book of Khalid* had what can be described as a crisis that precipitated his retreat to Lebanon. The end of Nu'ayma's *Sā'at al-Kūkū* closely resembles the devastation wrought in *Chicago*, as violence and death are also present at the story's close. *Chicago*, along with *New York 80*, are certainly the most melodramatic texts of the recent collection in revisiting this narrative tendency established in the *Mahjar*. Writing America through a focus on America's problems confirms an obsession with displaying America's faults and horrors, even while these foreign faults and horrors are ensconced in, and frequently establishing parallels with, the even more dominant preoccupation with home, here Egypt. This preoccupation with home, of course, has been an undeniable narrative concern running through all of the literary encounters with America. While the end of *Chicago* is shocking, and perhaps unnecessary in its utter devastation, it is certainly not out of character for this larger body of literature.

Conclusion

The attempt of this dissertation to amalgamate and analyze a set of literary texts in Arabic that span a century, and are united by the ethno-linguistic origins of their authors and the American setting of the texts, does not, in and of itself, ensure a synchronization of thematic and formal elements. That said, the Arab experiences in America that this literature depicts and probes reveal continuities within this vast American encounter; these continuities are of course modified in response to the ever-changing historical realities in the Arab world and America. Paradigms of writing the encounter persist, explorations of the divided and alienated self abound, and reformations of the American dream – or nightmare - are constantly reworked. Across this span of time and space this literature of the American encounter generates new meanings, specifically subjective Arab meanings that are projected onto American geographies, spaces, ideologies and symbols. The inherent tension explored in this study between the uniqueness of each artistic work as contemplated alongside the text's harmonization with other texts of the American encounter has led to an interesting set differences and similarities.

The division of the texts into circumscribed chapters speaks to a fusion undergirding the historical period of the chapter and the aesthetic choices shared by the chapter's texts. The relative cohesion within each chapter ends up emphasizing the differences between the historical periods, texts and formal strategies employed by texts in other chapters. For example, the texts of the *Mahjar* were responsive to the earliest concerns of the first community of Arab émigrés to America, featuring a communal insularity and focus on struggles of Arab assimilation in America. These early narratives

were stylistically plot driven, favoring a didactic mode of narration. The chapter featuring *New York 80* and *al-Rihla*, on the other hand, is imbued with the political and ideological positioning of each protagonist, thereby responsive to the antagonism that emerged between the Arab world and America in the post-World War II era. The aesthetic choices of the authors of this period featured outwardly confident Arab protagonists engaged, dialogically and sometimes combatively, with his or her American counterpart. The charged political period of the 1970s, in America and the Arab world, permeated the aesthetic renderings of plot and theme. The final chapter shifts only a couple decades later, but reinforces yet another turn, this being a turn towards a globalized world of emerging transnational affiliations. *Amrikānlī* and *Chicago* represent this shift in their aesthetic choices, utilizing the polyphony of voices, and dispersing narrative authority to a wide cast of Arab and American subjectivities, reacting to the multicultural emphasis clearly present in America, and resonating throughout the world. It is clear that the texts of each chapter form a unique bond between their stage of creation and their aesthetic sensibilities.

For all the differences between texts, historical moments, and aesthetic choices, I believe that those elements that bind these texts are paramount, not only to better understand the American encounter in Arabic literature, but also to conceptualizing a literary history of this encounter over the course of a century. From the *The Book of Khalid*, written in 1911, up through *Chicago*, published in 2008, there have been similarities in theme, structure and form that have unified this unique subset of Arabic literature. The reworking of the narrative paradigms of encounter established in the *Mahjar*, the meditations on the divided sense of self, and the overwhelming use of

autobiographical and experiential modes of narration are merely three elements that cohere this literature. I turn to a few specific examples in demonstrating the profound connectivity of this literature over time and space.

The rich and highly significant feeling of ambivalence that Arab characters confront in America is one of these fascinating continuities. In one of the early accounts from the *Mahjar*, in Ḥaddād's story *‘Abd al-Fiṭra*, we find an Arab émigré struggling to reconcile the emerging division between his Arab constitution and American affiliations. Given the early provenance of this short story, this character's struggle with these ambivalent feelings lack a psychological complexity or treatment, but play out through his actions in the story's linear plot, initiating his return to the homeland, where he is *also* alienated, resulting in his return to America where he settles. Jumping forward to *New York 80*, we find an Arab protagonist caught in a riveting debate with his American counterpart. This Arab protagonist's ambivalence is developed through a deep crisis as he mobilizes his moralistic repudiations of her capitalist arguments; all the while he remains enthralled by her assertiveness, intellect and bold femininity. The protagonist's ambivalence steadily increases as he gains a better understanding of his American counterpart, challenging the reader's ability to make sense of his complex state of confusion and affiliations. Meanwhile, the Egyptian characters in *Chicago* evince a spectrum of identity crises infused with stifling feelings of ambivalence. Perhaps the best image is Dr. Ṣalāḥ in his basement, wearing his old, ill-fitting clothes from his student days in Egypt. Dr. Ṣalāḥ's crisis proves deadly, providing a devastatingly hyperbolic rendering of the ambivalence that Arab subjectivities have been attempting to reconcile on this literary plane for a century.

Co-present with this rich ambivalence is the alienation that is also present in these accounts through the years. The protagonist from Ḥaddād's *ʿAbd al-Fiṭra* experiences an alienation motivating his return to the homeland, and back to America once again, demonstrating how alienation enters these narratives of the American encounter as a double-edged sword. A later example of this shared phenomenon is present in *al-Riḥla*, as Raḍwā is constantly alienated from her American surroundings, made clear through representations of herself as an incarnation of the oppositional leftist politics that she espouses. This level of alienation from America is certainly not surprising, given her personal politics and Egypt's complex and often contentious relationship with the United States beginning in the second half of the 20th century. It is the alienation from her native Egypt that she experiences at al-Azhar Mosque on a visit home that reveals a dualistic nuance. The fact is, despite her politics and ideology, America offers new possibilities, often gendered, that temper the intensity of even the most politically and ideologically infused literature. Alienation is transposed onto *Amrīkānlī* in line with the transnational interconnectivity pressed into the novel's network of characters. Professor Shukri's professional experience in Egypt, followed by his interaction with student Larry, whose thesis on the New Historians of Israel is rejected, reveals a systematic repression of academic freedom transcending national borders. The encounter with America in *Amrīkānlī*, cast through a prism of alienation, transcends borders through a protagonist equally alienated by a broad range of experiences in consumerist America as well as his own Egypt, where his desire for free expression is constantly thwarted, driving him into a fury.

The American encounter hinges on other themes that have been reenacted and reinterpreted for over a century. The didactic urge that was eminently explicit in the *Mahjar* writers' desire to provide 'lessons' for new émigrés morphed into the insertion of historical treatises in *al-Rihla* and *Chicago*, not to mention the fact that *Amrīkānlī* actually utilizes footnotes to provide the reader with detailed context for the fictional protagonist's experience in America. The didactic urge, for the most part, is distinct from the European encounter in that these texts on America are often fixated on trying to teach their readers about America, and confronting its unexpected complexities, whereas the European encounter, given the colonial history between nations, not only assumes the reader's familiarity with this European other, but becomes much more fixated on the psychological and emotional nuances implicit in the entanglements with Europe. Not only is America much further removed geographically than Europe, but also misunderstandings of America abound, and this literature exhibits a craving to rectify this situation, regardless of how subjective the presentation of context and history is within the fictional world.

Perhaps the most unique challenge that America poses for Arab authors is its incredible diversity. This diversity is especially challenging because, unlike more homogenous nations composed of an ethnically uniform citizenry, America's diversity allows for the possibility of seeing oneself, whether an émigré, immigrant or visitor, as a *potential* American. Hence all the challenges of identity discussed in the dissertation become even more acute. The gravity of this potentiality explains why some of these texts include such devastating scenes. For example, the children returned from the orphanage in *al-'Amal wal-'Alam*, the ravenous and metaphorical 'American Mother' in

The Book of Khalid, Māhir's devastated wife in *Amrīkānlī*, or the horrifying death of Raʿfat's daughter in *Chicago*. These instances dramatize the potential devastation of losing one's roots, forgetting one's past, as America's potential to 'swallow' its population posits alarming renderings of the assimilative process; the dream becomes a nightmare. Yet these moments are not the only resolutions to this challenge that America presents. The diversity of America is also cause for celebration, and *al-Rihla* and *Amrīkānlī*, especially, affirm these possibilities. Raḍwā and Professor Shukri engage with their surroundings, and both are captivated by the freedoms, possibilities, as well as their unexpected identifications with America and Americans. These reactions certainly do not constitute the elusive 'American Dream' that characters in the *Mahjar* were seeking, but represent a potential reconciliation of one's Arab roots with this diverse and complex *Amrīkā*.

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